

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Grievance

MS S.E. WALKER (Nedlands) [9.54 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Community Development, Women's Interests, Seniors and Youth. I will raise some issues on the various draft papers released by the family and domestic violence unit on working together to address family and domestic violence. A vote for the Gallop Government will be a vote for a Government that gives low priority to social and welfare responsibilities, as can be seen from this document. One of the Labor Party's policy documents entitled "family strength", to which the member for Kalgoorlie referred during his grievance this morning, is headed "Labor's Approach to Community Development" and reads -

State government has a profound responsibility to provide for the social and welfare needs of our community, and a failure to do so is a fundamental failure of government.

...

For effective social policy, Western Australians need a concerted, holistic approach and it needs a powerful driver.

It is obvious from the leaked memo this week from the minister's department that she is not seen as a powerful driver and that the community does not see the Gallop Government as a powerful driver in this area. I will comment on many things in this document in the weeks to come. However, I will confine my grievance today to three areas: firstly, the notion of family violence; secondly, what appears to be the minister's passing to the community the responsibility of managing serious sexual and other criminal offences against people; and, thirdly, that she and her newly established unit have failed to acknowledge that witnessing domestic violence is a form of child abuse.

I ask the minister to explain this new notion of family violence and why criminal offences such as indecent dealing, murder, attempted murder, all forms of paedophilia, grievous bodily harm, assault occasioning bodily harm etc have been subsumed under the phrase of domestic violence. We are talking about serious criminal offences. I refer to page 5 of the document on working together to address family and domestic violence, which has a subheading "A working definition". The minister has created the new family and domestic violence unit, and the term family violence is described as follows -

... most often used to address violence occurring in the full range of family and/or caring relationships.

...

Family and domestic violence can be defined as any form of abuse of power within relationships of trust and/or dependency which causes the victim to live in fear of an abuser or abusers.

...

Violence can include:

Physical or sexual assault

Psychological abuse

Emotional, spiritual or cultural abuse

Social isolation

Neglect

In court hearings I have attended that have dealt with grievous bodily harm charges against a husband or wife, the term domestic violence is often used as a tactic to window-dress a serious criminal offence. I am asking why all those criminal offences have been subsumed under this phrase.

What has happened to domestic violence counselling? Why is it no longer part of this new family and domestic violence unit? Why has it taken the minister two and a half years to provide a discussion paper now on these serious issues? Only now, after two and a half years, has a so-called action plan been circulated to deal with these very serious issues. Each government agency has a different definition of domestic violence, which will compound and dilute a coordinated response. What is the minister doing about that? Importantly, can the minister tell me what is the Department for Community Development's approach to allegations of child sexual abuse within the family? The first paragraph on page 7 of the document reads -

The Action Plan on Family and Domestic Violence will seek to ensure the safety of all family members by changing the emphasis from responding to incidents, to engaging communities to develop solutions to family and domestic violence.

What does that shift mean? I find it a little disturbing. Does it mean that serious criminal offences will be left unchecked and somehow the responsibility will be moved from the police and the Department for Community Development to the community? The paper creates the impression that domestic violence is a community problem. I know that the minister has received submissions about this paper. Those submissions have raised concerns that that approach creates anxiety that there is a real risk that domestic violence again will be seen as a private matter and will be treated as such. I refer again to this document, which I find a little chilling because it talks about empowering the community and individuals and building the capacity of the community to understand family and domestic violence. The document says that the whole community has a role to play in developing safety for its members. It says that many people are placed in a position to respond to family violence when it impacts directly on the lives of their families and friends. It says also that the Government will continue to play a role. It is the responsibility of the police in this State to commence prosecutions when serious criminal offences have been committed, and it does not matter whether or not it is in the context of the family. I want to know what is happening in that regard. I also ask the minister to explain where she is going with shifting the responsibility on to the community and reducing the role that the Government is supposed to play. People who have come to see me are very concerned about this issue. They are concerned that the minister is again attempting to make the issue of domestic violence and child abuse a private matter. I also raise with the minister the failure of the paper to recognise that witnessing domestic violence is a form of child abuse. Will the minister respond to those issues?

MS S.M. McHALE (Thornlie - Minister for Community Development, Women's Interests, Seniors and Youth) [10.01 am]: That was some grievance!

Ms S.E. Walker: I knew you would like it and I knew you would not be able to answer it.

Ms S.M. McHALE: I would say that it was more of an embarrassment.

Ms S.E. Walker interjected.

Ms S.M. McHALE: Would the member like to listen to the response? First, the suggestion that the Government will ignore criminal offences is absolute garbage. Secondly, the member has implied that we are trying to make sexual abuse and domestic abuse a private matter. For goodness sake, will the member get real?

Ms S.E. Walker interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr A.J. Dean): Order, member for Nedlands!

Ms S.M. McHALE: Everything that the Gallop Government and its ministers, including me, have done has been about making these matters open. The Government has put drugs, child abuse in Aboriginal communities or elsewhere and sexuality issues on the public agenda for discussion. The implication by the member for Nedlands about its being a private matter is absolute nonsense. It is correct that it is the role of the police to commence investigations. That will be the focus of the police. Of course the police have the role of investigating offences. The member also tried to suggest that we are shifting the responsibility on to the community. Again, that is absolute garbage. We are saying that these issues are community issues and that the approach that the Government needs to take is one of collaboration. That is what we have seen with the Community Drug Summit and the work we are doing with communities. We are engaging communities to accept responsibility at one level. People need to recognise that abuse in any form is not to be tolerated and that it requires behavioural change, a good legal framework and good supportive mechanisms, and that is what we are doing.

Mrs C.A. Martin interjected.

Ms S.M. McHALE: The member for Kimberley is absolutely right. If we are to change decades of abuse and decades of Governments not taking these issues seriously, we need a new way of working, and that is what we are endeavouring to do.

Ms S.E. Walker: You need to take some action.

Ms S.M. McHALE: A new way of working requires a different mind-set so that we can work collaboratively with organisations at the grassroots on the systemic issues. I know that the member for Nedlands does not have that mind-set, but we do.

Ms S.E. Walker interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Order, member for Nedlands!

Ms S.M. McHALE: I will make a couple of remarks about what we have been doing, because an extensive investment has been made in the domestic violence area, not only in my portfolio but also in the police and health portfolios. The Government's approach has been to develop responses that meet the needs of local communities. That is why we have been supporting the work of the regional domestic violence committees. We have increased their funding and are providing grants so that they can work in their local neighbourhoods on training and workshops for staff and can become more skilled in working with, for instance, Aboriginal families and families from linguistically diverse backgrounds. The current funding for family and domestic violence services across my department is \$18 million.

Ms S.E. Walker interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Order, member for Nedlands!

Several members interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER: I call the member for Nedlands to order for the first time. I have been in this place for three years and believe that it is customary practice for members on both sides of the Chamber to listen to a grievance in silence. That has been observed 99 per cent of the time. The member should listen to the response.

Ms S.M. McHALE: Thank you, Mr Acting Speaker. I am not sure whether the member for Nedlands can do that, but we will see.

What I am trying to get across in my seven minutes is that the issues of child abuse and domestic violence are endemic in our community. There have been decades of neglect. This Government is working with communities and organisations to ensure we pick up the local ideas and wisdom so that we can increase that support.

Earlier this week I spoke about the new legislation for children, which will have a focus on domestic violence. I assure the member for Nedlands that when we debate the new children's legislation, she will see that it contains references to domestic violence in the context of child sexual abuse. We are also significantly increasing the funding to services that work with women and children and perpetrators of domestic violence. We recognise the critical importance of supporting children who witness and live with domestic violence. That is why we have worked with women's refugees throughout the State to increase their services.

Ms S.E. Walker interjected.

Ms S.M. McHALE: If the member for Nedlands would listen, she would hear that we are developing new services.

Several members interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Order, members!

Ms S.M. McHALE: I will remark on that interjection because both the member for Nedlands and the member for Hillarys came into this Chamber and said that they had received a leaked e-mail. In fact, they had received two e-mails, which somebody had put together to misrepresent staff of my department. It is important that people realise that those members misrepresented good public servants.

Several members interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Order! I remind members of my recent comments.

Point of Order

Ms S.E. WALKER: The member for Willagee said that it was fraudulent behaviour for the member for Hillarys and me to bring those e-mails into the Parliament. He is casting a slur on our character and is impugning us, and I ask him to withdraw.

Mr R.C. KUCERA: If the issue is that the e-mails have allegedly been put together to put one point of view, there is no point of order.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: That was not a point of order by the Minister for Health. It is typical of him, sprouting off and bubbling away. He does not know what he is talking about; he has not been here long enough. The member for Willagee said that the member for Nedlands and I fraudulently brought e-mails into this House. That is casting an aspersion on our character. They were not fraudulent. One set of e-mails was sent to me. The point of order is that the member called our actions fraudulent.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr A.J. Dean): Unfortunately, because of the interjection of the member for Hillarys, I did not hear what was said at the time. The member has a very commanding voice and I did not hear what was said. There is no point of order.

Debate Resumed

Ms S.M. McHALE: The member for Nedlands said that it was in the same e-mail. I put on record that there were two e-mails from two people. That was the point of the minister's comment.

I do not believe that the Opposition is very interested in hearing what the Government is doing because the Government is doing a lot.