

CHILDREN IN CARE — POLICE CONTACT

Statement

HON TJORN SIBMA (North Metropolitan) [6.21 pm]: I will try to keep this brief in light of other colleagues wishing to speak. There is undeniably a crisis—an epidemic, in fact—of youth crime across this state. I have recently come from the members' lounge when there was yet another example of it on the nightly news. I think each and every individual member of this chamber and of this Parliament quite rightly gives primacy to the conduct and future of our young people. Quite rightly, we should expect and support strong families. We expect, as community leaders in the broadest possible sense, parental responsibility. We expect parents to love, support, guide and develop their children. Personally, I find this an uncontroversial statement. That is an inescapable moral obligation.

When we see our young people in despair, when we see them hopeless without a vision of the future, and harming themselves and others around them, our first resort, and I think instinctively, and quite rightly, is to ask: where are their parents? What are their families doing? It is a question—in fact, it is a demand, I think—that the Premier has put on the parents of those children who are lost, who are hurting, and who are hurting others.

This is an issue, an epidemic, that we must confront, and we must confront constructively. But we know that the Premier's injunction for parents to parent falls on deaf ears. Despite the demands and quite a reasonable expectation, there are some parents who are parents in name alone. The only responsibility they can bear for their children, if they can accept even that, is the biological process that led to their creation. They provide no love, no support and no guidance, and never will. Demanding more from the hopeless and the irredeemable is not going to solve this issue. I do not think that is a partisan point; I think that is a statement of reality.

There is an unfortunately large cohort of children in this state who cannot rely on the love of their biological parents. Those poor children, in the antiquated phrase, are made wards of the state. In the more convoluted bureaucratic language, they are the children under the care of the CEO of the Department of Communities. Today in question time, I wanted to inquire into that cohort of children—children for whom the state government steps in and fulfils the role of parent. I was curious to know whether there were records on the interaction between this cohort of kids and the police force and how many of this cohort of children have been charged with an offence and obviously entered into the criminal justice system. I was not expecting an answer today, because I think there is a lot of information, potentially, to go through. But the quality, the tone and the attitude that resonate out of the written answer that the otherwise very commendable and newly promoted Minister for Agriculture and Food was compelled to report and provide on behalf of the Minister for Child Protection I think needs to be reconsidered. I will read the answer. It states, in part —

... contact with the WA Police Force may mean a range of different things. Information concerning contact with and charges laid by the WA Police Force is recorded on individual case files and not in a centralised and aggregated manner. Reporting this information would require a manual review of individual case files, which would constitute an unreasonable diversion of Communities' resources.

I will just focus my remarks on the last sentence. In layperson's language, that means, "We cannot be bothered answering your question. It is beneath us. We won't even make an effort."

Hon Peter Foster: That is not correct.

Hon TJORN SIBMA: I am sorry, member; that is correct. We need to play the long game in this chamber. I wish the newly promoted Minister for Child Protection well. She should not accept an answer that it is too hard. There are hard questions that do require research. Good ministers, such as the beleaguered and much criticised Minister for Corrective Services, will give a commitment to give an answer. If the minister lets her department snow her over, that will be her great undoing. If the government cannot take upon itself the responsibility to answer a question like this, it might reflect on its moral high ground when it demands more from people who are never going to give it.

I might make this reflection, too: I am very concerned that the departmental systems are inadequate to even provide a response. The creation of this mega-agency was supposed to result in streamlined and seamless service delivery. What this seems to insinuate—I hope it is not the case, but it is the only conclusion I can draw—is that this department, six or seven years after the machinery-of-government changes, is ill equipped to answer a question like this, which I think, quite humbly, is a simple question. I actually wish the minister well. As a fellow northern suburbs member of Parliament, and co-convener with me for the Parliamentary Friends of Germany, I like and respect Hon Sabine Winton, and I want to empower her to get the kinds of answers that a minister of the Crown should demand out of the bureaucracy. If a minister lets a department get away with an answer like that, there is absolutely no way they will save these kids.