

DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT - ROYAL COMMISSION

516. Mr P.D. OMODEI to the Premier:

An unacceptable number of young children known to the Department for Community Development have died in Western Australia. Between 2003-04 and 2004-05 the number of staff in the department increased by approximately 200. Despite this, the number of children who died increased dramatically. Recently, the government has thrown more money at the Department for Community Development.

- (1) Why does the government fail to realise that simply throwing more money and more resources at the Department for Community Development will not resolve the systemic problems that exist within the department?
- (2) In light of the damning and tragic statistics relating to child deaths in Western Australia, will the Premier agree to establish a royal commission to investigate the clear and present failings that exist within the Department for Community Development; and, if not, why not?

Mr A.J. CARPENTER replied:

- (1)-(2) I have already given an answer to the second part of the question. In relation to the first part of the question, I basically gave the answer to it yesterday when I was directing commentary to the member for Churchlands. The statistics show that this government is taking the issue seriously. The opposition did nothing. Its record when in government was disgraceful.

Mr P.D. Omodei interjected.

The SPEAKER: Order! Does the Leader of the Opposition want me to name him? When I stand he will stop whatever he is carrying on with and listen to what I say, not what he wants to say. Does the Leader of the Opposition understand?

Mr P.D. Omodei: Yes, Mr Speaker.

The SPEAKER: I call the Leader of the Opposition to order for the first time. It is unacceptable to this house for the member to continue to try to speak over the member on his feet who is attempting to give an answer.

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: The degree of sensitivity reflects the shameful approach that the opposition took on this issue yesterday. That is why the opposition is sensitive about this. I refer to the disgraceful commentary that came from members opposite via the media yesterday on this particular issue. It is interesting to note that at least one member of the opposition informed me that he refused to take part in yesterday's "strategy", shall we call it. It is also interesting to note that we are seeing a reversion to the sort of political tactics that dominated the opposition's style for its first four years of opposition. We saw a brief respite from that approach when the member for Kalgoorlie was the Leader of the Opposition. He at least attempted to address policy issues. What we have seen, and are increasingly seeing, is a reversion to the tactics that were adopted by the Liberal Party under the leadership of the member for Cottesloe. It is salient that he is now directing opposition strategy. Yesterday's performance will hang around the necks of some members opposite for a long time. Some members - those who are capable of it - should be ashamed of themselves.

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Order, members!

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: The independent Child Death Review Committee commenced its reviews in January 2005. In its 2004-05 annual report the independent committee identified the following improvements since August 2003. The new Children and Community Service Act 2004, which was proclaimed in March this year, will significantly change the way the department works. I refer to the report of the Child Death Review Committee. In particular, the act has a strong focus on engaging children and families in critical decision making that affects their lives. The act provides clear definitions of what is meant by a child being harmed and/or neglected when a child is in need of protection. Field staff were trained in the act between September 2005 and March 2006. The department has issued a revised assessment safety framework, which includes accountable decision making by case workers. Officers can use the framework to make informed decisions about when a child is in need of protection. Since 12 November 2004 case workers have been able to access field worker guidelines online. This tool provides a guide to decision making on complex case practice issues and professional standards of work. The department has also revised and strengthened its guidelines regarding responses to families when there have been multiple contacts and identifiable risk factors for children. The department's team leaders have received supervision training. The department is establishing a standard monitoring unit, which will be fully operational by February 2007. A raft of changes have been implemented in response to the issues that are raised in the report in the broad.

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Order! I call the Deputy Leader of the Opposition and the member for Nedlands to order.

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: In concluding my answer, I once again refer members opposite and anybody else who has a genuine interest in this issue to the comments and sentiments expressed by Mrs Jakins in response to this issue. I refer them to her response to the attack on case workers and individuals in the department, and I ask them to consider those remarks.