

Legislative Council

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FOSTER CARERS

The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON (15:09): I seek leave to make a brief explanation before asking the minister representing the Minister for Families and Communities a question about the government's duty of care to foster carers.

Leave granted.

The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON: Arising from the *Today Tonight* program aired the night before last on the Tom Easling case, many disturbing allegations were made about the conduct of Families SA and its Special Investigations Unit. Although Mr Easling was found not guilty by a jury on all 20 charges of child abuse, the manner in which Mr Easling's case was handled by Families SA investigators is seriously under question.

Amongst other things, in its zeal to make stick allegations of child abuse against Mr Easling, it is alleged that departmental officers had trawled for victims and later destroyed original notes, lost documents, verbalised witnesses, and offered some witnesses inducements (even to the point of coercion), and their evidence was selectively recorded to portray Mr Easling as a dangerous predator of vulnerable children. After an 11 week trial, Mr Easling was found not guilty of all charges. It is interesting to note that this court case cost his family personally \$1.9 million to be able to support him and prove his innocence.

On the program Mr Easling also offered to pay for a royal commission into his case. Meanwhile, the minister responsible for Families SA maintains that his department has behaved appropriately and that the conduct of the special investigation unit (SIU) officers has been beyond reproach.

Also appearing on that program was the head of the special investigations unit from New South Wales, who made comment that the conduct of this unit in the investigation was highly suspicious and almost broke every procedure in place in New South Wales. It was also reported that Mr Easling has been forced to abandon his claim for compensation as the government has indemnified itself from claims made against it by foster carers—and that, in itself, is a whole other story. My questions are:

1. Will the minister concede that the investigation process of the SIU in this particular matter was flawed and needs immediate review?
2. Will the minister admit that perhaps he is not getting the full truth from members of his department on serious matters such as false allegations, and even (as alluded to by Mr Easling) corrupt conduct of individual officers?
3. Will the minister make a commitment to support Mr Tom Easling's call for a royal commission, for which he has stated that he is personally prepared to pay if there is no finding of corrupt conduct by this department?
4. How does the minister reconcile his public statements on the *Today Tonight* program on Monday indicating confidence in the conduct of his staff, while previously asserting that his department owes children in the minister's care a duty of care, when now claiming indemnity for his staff?

5. How many more damaging facts about Mr Easling's case will need to emerge before the Premier himself will intervene and call for a full inquiry into this particular case?

The Hon. CARMEL ZOLLO (Minister for Emergency Services, Minister for Correctional Services, Minister for Road Safety, Minister Assisting the Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (15:12): I thank the honourable member for her questions and will refer them to the minister in the other place and bring back a response. However, it has just been brought to my attention that we actually have a select committee on Families SA in this chamber as well, which was set up by the honourable member herself. Nevertheless, I will refer the question to the minister in the other place, who I am sure has a response.