

# Forced sterilisation 'a step too far'

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**SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT MINISTER: Paula Bennett has backtracked on comments she made suggesting the Government was discussing forced 'state-ordered' sanctions preventing some parents having more children.**

Social development Minister Paula Bennett has been forced to hose down suggestions the Government wants to stop parents who have neglected or abused their children from having more babies.

In an interview with Radio Live talkback host Michael Laws last week, Ms Bennett was asked whether the Government would consider a "state-ordered sanction" to prevent such parents having more children.

The Government was "right now discussing that kind of measure", Ms Bennett replied.

"That is a step which is right out there and I can tell you there are certainly discussions going on around it."

The comments led to beneficiary advocate Sue Bradford saying the Government was embarking on a "slippery slope to eugenics" and Christchurch-based anti-child-abuse charity Family Help Trust saying it raised human rights issues.

Ms Bennett yesterday clarified her comments, saying the Government was considering strengthening measures to remove babies of parents who seriously abused or neglected their children, but that forced sterilisation or contraception was a "step too far".

Courts already have the ability to remove children from such parents.

In 2011, 148 babies were removed from parents within 30 days of them being born. In 2010, 177 babies were removed.

Most of them had siblings who had been abused or neglected, or parents who suffered mental illness.

Under changes being considered, parents would be warned during court sentencing they faced having subsequent children taken off them, potentially permanently.

Ms Bennett said the Government was also looking at sanctions such as preventing the parent from living or working with children.

Asked why she didn't elaborate her intentions with Mr Laws, Ms Bennett said she made it "quite clear we were looking at the removal of children" but "he chose to ignore it".

Greens co-leader Metiria Turei, who last week criticised Ms Bennett for her "vitriolic personal attacks" on solo mothers, said Ms Bennett's latest "dog-whistle" comments would have populist appeal but would do nothing to help vulnerable children.

"Regardless of what she really meant, she's had her latest cheap thrill at the expense of real policy."

Family violence was a complex problem, she said.

"She is so busy blaming children and mothers that she is not addressing the fact that thousands of women and children cry out for help each year and are not getting it."

Labour welfare spokeswoman Jacinda Ardern said vulnerable children were already being removed quickly from their parents.

Measures suggested would not have prevented the death of 2-month-old Rotorua baby Tahi Elvis Edwards, suffocated by his mother Ngaire Tukiwaho after a day drinking, she said. Child, Youth and Family was unaware Tukiwaho, who lost an earlier baby to sudden infant death syndrome, had given birth to Tahi.

"The minister has really attached this to that case without the circumstances being widely known," Ms Ardern said.

Ms Bennett said final decisions, including when the threshold measures would kick in, had not been made.