



Speech by

Hon. D. WELLS

MEMBER FOR MURRUMBIDGE

Hansard 17 September 1998

MINISTER FOR EMERGENCY SERVICES

Hon. D. M. WELLS (Murrumbidgee—ALP) (Minister for Education) (6.39 p.m.): This evening the House has two options. There is a motion from the Opposition congratulating the board and there is a motion from the Government congratulating the firefighters. We have reduced the options to two. That is a choice that even the honourable members of the One Nation Party can follow. I urge members to support the firefighters, not the board.

We have not heard any argument why we should administer this adulation to the board. We on this side of the House are not greatly impressed by boards. We voted against the establishment of the fire and ambulance boards. When the honourable member for Chatsworth was the Minister, he abolished 81 fire boards, because that is what the Firefighters Union wanted. Why should we now give this adulation to the fire board? I do not know of any single reason that has been put forward, except perhaps the one put forward by the honourable member for Redlands, who said in this House that the establishment of the board had restored the dignity of firefighters. They never needed to have their dignity restored. They always had dignity. Whatever else they would have liked, even under the previous Government they were never short of dignity; these are the people who put their lives on the line to save other people. Perhaps they would have liked some better equipment, a few more firemen or even a pay rise under the previous Government, but they were never short of dignity.

Even if we accept the mad premise that they were going to get more dignity through the establishment of a board, I do not know exactly how it would have worked. For example, we could put on two or three firefighters at a cost of \$100,000, which is what it would cost to maintain for a period this artificial quango—this useless board—which was established by my honourable friend on the other side of the House. Should that \$100,000 go to the board or the firefighters? Honourable members opposite say that it should go to the board because that will enhance the dignity of firefighters. If a lot of money is spent on a board, it means that somewhere one man will have to go into a blaze instead of two, or two men instead of three—

Mr Mackenroth: In my electorate they were closing the fire station because they did not have enough firemen.

Mr WELLS: I take the interjection of the honourable member. I am sorry if Hansard could not hear it; I will tell them what it was afterwards.

What it really means is that fewer firefighters are available as a result of the decision to set up a board. We can imagine the euphoria that they would feel as they go understaffed and undermanned into a situation of grave danger. They would think, "Well, at least we have the dignity of having a board to administer our affairs"! What good is served by having an extra layer of management like this? Why should we give adulation? Why should we, as the honourable member for Charters Towers said, pay tribute to the board? We do pay tribute to the board. Those extra layers of management cost money to run. They receive their tribute in the form of the meeting fees and the accommodation and travel allowances that they are paid for junketing around the State as they make unnecessary visits to various places to consult with people who do not know the answers to the questions; the people who know the answers are the firefighters. The board members are not firefighters.

Mr Mackenroth: When I became the Minister for fire services, at the Brisbane board every member got a cigar at every meeting they went to—a big cigar.

Mr WELLS: Mr Speaker, that was a really interesting interjection. You will have to read Hansard to see it, because I do not have time to repeat it.

I wanted to clear up one point. The honourable member for Southport said that the Minister does not believe that the firefighters deserve a pay rise. She never said that. What she said was that the pay rise that the previous Minister had granted was unfunded. She was criticising his economic management, not the pay rise. Let that be very clear. This is a Government which is committed to the firefighters. We are not committed to the boards, artificial levels of administration and gratuitous managerialism. We are saying to honourable members in this House: do not vote for gratuitous managerialism or excessive boards, vote for the firemen.

Time expired.
