



Speech by

GEOFF WILSON

MEMBER FOR FERNY GROVE

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EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr WILSON (Ferry Grove—ALP) (2.46 p.m.): It gives me enormous pleasure to rise in support of the Emergency Services Legislation Amendment Bill, for it is a very significant piece of legislation. This Bill will give back to the operational firefighters and ambulance officers of this State power over their own destinies—power that was taken away by the bureaucratic nature of the statutory authorities and boards that were established. That power was not taken away by the board members themselves, I should say, but by the very nature and structure of the boards that were established.

Boards are simply wrong for an essential emergency service delivery organisation such as we are dealing with here. Boards govern capital ventures and profit-driven public companies and are not interested in ensuring adequate and equitable service delivery to disadvantaged, isolated, remote and rural communities, which are key components of the service delivery area served by the Fire and Rescue Authority and the ambulance.

Emergency services are people-oriented services. Each day, Queenslanders do not know whether they may need emergency services. They are not interested in profit margins but are interested in ensuring that the fire threatening their property is put out, that the ambulance arrives to pick up the sick patient or that the car accident victim is rescued as quickly as possible. This legislation will improve the capacity of our emergency services to deliver these vital, lifesaving services across the State.

The legislation concentrates on restoring accountability to the chief executive officer as the accountable officer for the management functions previously held by the board. The Fire Commissioner and the Ambulance Commissioner will have returned to them the right to run their services. They will no longer have to go cap in hand to a board for approval to undertake mundane tasks. Managers will again be able to manage, and operational staff at the coalface will be able to undertake their duties in the confidence that management will not have to contend with an undemocratic and bureaucratic board questioning their every decision—an unnecessary structure of intervention in the decision-making process within the services.

They will have accountability. Accountability involves ensuring that the organisation is managed in a proper fashion, with appropriate financial and corporate governance mechanisms in place. In other words, it involves ensuring that the two services are run efficiently and effectively with the most direct decision-making line of management possible. The boards abrogated their responsibility in these matters. The recent independent audit—and I underline "independent audit"—conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers illustrated very well the lack of financial accountability and acumen of the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority Board. The board allowed the QFRA to career down a debt-ridden track towards disaster—and we are not going to stand by and allow that disaster to happen.

The Minister recently told this House that, by the year 2004, the QFRA would be \$118m in debt if no remedial action was taken. So remedial action will be taken by this Minister, who will not stand by and allow this situation to continue uncorrected. The Minister also reported that PricewaterhouseCoopers found that serious governance shortfalls exist and questions arise about the relevance of a board structure for the strategic management of a service delivery agency such as the QFRA. The board structure is simply wrong. This legislation will rectify that situation. This legislation will ensure proper representation of all Queenslanders in their emergency services by creating the Emergency Services Advisory Council. I commend the Minister on the adoption of this innovation.

The Emergency Services Advisory Council will provide advice to the Minister on the extent to which current service delivery satisfies community needs. So we have a happy marriage of a very straight-line form of decision making within the system by the return of that decision making to the CEOs, then the director-general and then the Minister. That system is then complemented by a community consultation and advisory structure. The council will advise the Minister on what the fire and ambulance services are doing right and what they are doing wrong. With an independent chairperson, this should ensure an improved service delivery.

One of the many hallmarks for which this Beattie Labor Government will become known for as history looks back upon us after 10 or 15 years of Government is that community consultation has taken first place in the way in which this Government goes about administering this State for the betterment of all Queenslanders. So this structure—the advisory council—is just another example of how, in the administration of Government in this State, we are building in, as an integral part of decision making, widely based community consultation and advice.

The other major stakeholder groups will have representation on the Emergency Services Advisory Council, including the Local Government Association of Queensland, which has a vital interest, of course, in the work of the Emergency Services Department; relevant major unions, which do a very effective job in representing the employees of the service across a wide range of issues of concern to them; the local ambulance committees, which are a wonderful grassroots structure that underpins the operation of the Ambulance Service; the business sector; universities; and the rural sector. A more widespread and comprehensive representation of different sectoral groups within the community one could not get.

As members would realise, this council, drawn from across the community, will provide a much better and appropriate consumers' feedback forum—more than any paid board could ever do. Indeed, it would be impossible to say that the composition in terms of background of the existing boards comes anywhere near a bull's roar of the composition and representation that will be provided by the new council. The work of the council will be effected without any adverse impact upon operational emergency service workers. The volunteer firefighters, honorary ambulance officers or auxiliaries will see absolutely no difference in the manner in which they perform their daily work, but they can rest assured that the decision-making process, which precedes the decisions that are made and which are ultimately seen at the coalface on a day-to-day basis, has been absolutely streamlined and made more efficient and effective. They will also see faster decision making, a redirection of funds to the coalface and a streamlined bureaucracy.

As the Minister said in her second-reading speech, approximately \$300,000 which has presently been consumed by the operation of the two boards will now, as a result of their abolition, be released to be devoted to coalface delivery of services by the emergency services authorities. Committees across Queensland will, over time, notice a large difference as this Government's redirection of funds enables better resources to be placed in the community, allows improved training opportunities for emergency services and ensures a more responsive role to calls of distress.

I want to mention a number of additional points that I believe are particularly worth bearing in mind in the House's consideration of this Bill. As has been previously argued by the Minister, when we are dealing with special services provided by the Government in the nature of emergency services, we cannot afford any mickey mouse approach. We cannot afford to be mucking around with board structures or any structures that potentially create an impediment to the more effective and immediate delivery of high-quality services to the Queensland community. That is why we have adopted an approach that streamlines the decision-making process. This is important generally, but it is especially important when we are dealing with the provision of lifesaving and property-protecting services, as provided through the emergency services authorities.

The adoption of an undemocratic, unelected board structure to manage the day-to-day operations of these two agencies is actually in contradiction to the way in which these services operate on the ground. As most members would well appreciate, the operation of emergency services structures is very much dependent upon the work of volunteers and the involvement of people in their local communities. Emergency services are very much a grassroots operation. So while the local communities are integrally involved in the operations of emergency services at the local level, it is only appropriate that, at the most senior decision-making level, there is also a community-based council that is established to advise the Minister. So that council, in fact, reflects at a senior level the very nature of the way in which these emergency services structures operate on the ground as very grassroots organisations.

One good illustration of that is the local ambulance committees that are found throughout the State and with which I have had the benefit of being associated. I refer to the Grovely ambulance district within my electorate. A local ambulance committee was established only a month or two ago as a result of a public meeting that was called by a number of strongly community-minded activists who are keen to expand the number of services and the quality of services provided by the Grovely

Ambulance Station. That was a very well attended public meeting. As a result of that, a committee has been established. That committee is now working very well in fundraising and in other activities to augment the work of the ambulance station at Grovely.

That is just one illustration of the grassroots structure that has been in place for many years across the State in areas where the local community gets together and has an attitude of actual ownership of the emergency services—in this case, the Ambulance Service—and is prepared to go in to bat and work effectively and energetically in the local community to improve the provision of services.

I am sure that, in common with myself, people in the local communities will regard the adoption of this Bill, and particularly of the council structure at a senior level, as a compliment and as an endorsement of the grassroots involvement of the local community in the provision of high-quality emergency services.

When one takes into account all those matters—the matters raised by the Minister in his second-reading speech and what I am sure will be the excellent arguments that are to be brought by Government members following me in this debate—one will be left in no doubt whatsoever that this is an absolutely necessary step. I commend the Minister for having the initiative and the courage to take this most vital step. I support the Bill.
