



Speech by

Mr J. HEGARTY

MEMBER FOR REDLANDS

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APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL; APPROPRIATION BILL
Committee (Cognate Debate)
Estimates Committee B
Report

Mr HEGARTY (Redlands—NPA) (4.28 p.m.): I was not a member of the Estimates committee, but when reading the report from Estimates Committee B on the Department of Emergency Services, the Queensland Ambulance Service and the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority, I was pleased to see that an improvement in funding and resources that were established under the previous coalition Government was continuing. Some of the new initiatives, such as the pensioner and Seniors Card holders' free ambulance service, will be welcomed by many Queenslanders, especially those on limited incomes. However, there is the question of what will be the impact of the cost of that in later years, particularly on the budget of the Department of Emergency Services. It is hoped that when the full cost is determined after the scheme is implemented next year there will be no resulting cutbacks in services or equipment to fund the shortfall in revenue.

The commitment to carry on projects initiated in previous coalition Government Budgets is also welcomed, particularly in capital works. I mention projects in my electorate, such as the new ambulance station at Redland Bay—\$450,000 was allocated in the previous Budget and I am pleased to say that work is due to start soon—and the combined fire and ambulance station on Macleay Island, which will be welcomed by the stalwarts who man the Rural Fire Service and the ambulance services on that island, as well as the other islands in my electorate.

Unfortunately, Opposition committee members were forced to submit a dissenting report over the Minister's refusal to provide copies of the so-called PricewaterhouseCoopers report into the alleged mismanagement of the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority. The Minister made the claim that this report showed the fund would be facing a deficit of \$118m in six years' time. It is only reasonable, therefore, that the Estimates committee members should have been furnished with a copy of this report so they could properly analyse the alleged findings and determine if the budget allocations to the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority over the next 12 months and beyond were appropriate. This was despite the Minister admitting that the report had been fully funded by the QFRA's own budget and was not an expense incurred by the Minister's office.

If there were an element of truth in the Minister's accusations that the fund was facing financial trouble, then the Minister would have tabled the report and provided the Estimates committee with the facts, but she failed to do so. When she was asked during the Estimates committee hearing to furnish members with a copy of the report, she again refused.

These actions of the Minister made it impossible to properly analyse the appropriateness of funding allocated to the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority. Despite the Minister's accusation that the QFRA fund was in financial trouble and facing debt, she did admit, after probing by the former Minister and member for Southport, that the fund's balance as it appeared in the Budget papers bearing her own signature was in surplus by over \$18m. That surplus figure should speak for itself and should put to rest any claims by the Minister that the fund is facing debt.

It is regrettable that a Minister chooses to use the Estimates process, a process that is supposedly designed to allow for transparency and accountability, to refuse access by the committee to legitimate information needed to perform its task. Emergency Services is undoubtedly one of the most important Government functions for communities across Queensland. We must properly fund the service to meet the growing needs of all Queenslanders.

Earlier this week the Minister released meteorological reports that warn that Queensland could be facing one of its worst and most vicious summers in decades. The Minister warned particularly of a severe cyclone season which is expected to have a great impact in the State's north and far north. Despite her own warnings of violent summer weather patterns, the Minister decided to slash the Emergency Services budget by nearly 2%, or just over half a million dollars. This is unfortunate in the extreme, as the Minister has chosen to slash the budget allocation to the State Emergency Service, which plays the most vital of roles at times of severe storms, floods and fires.

The Budget papers produced by the Minister show clearly that the budget funding for volunteer SES vehicles will be cut, as will the level of subsidies provided for SES buildings. I think it is ironic that the Minister announced these cuts at a time when there are projections of severe weather patterns. It would be amusing if it were not so serious. I think the Minister should pay particular attention to those shortcomings in the budget in order to provide Queenslanders with the level of services they deserve.

Time expired.
