



Speech by

Mr J. HEGARTY

MEMBER FOR REDLANDS

Hansard 12 November 1998

EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr HEGARTY (Redlands—NPA) (3 p.m.): I rise to speak against the Bill, because I have no confidence in the Government's stated motives for the changes encompassed in the Bill. In common with Queensland's hundreds of firefighters and ambulance officers, I hold grave concerns that this Bill is not about improving the performance of the Queensland Ambulance Service or the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority. This Bill is about once again restoring the influence of the bureaucracy and the party political factions within those two organisations. There is no place for Labor's political manoeuvring or factional brawling in the operation of the QAS or the QFRA. It has been tried in the past by the Goss Government; it failed in a spectacular fashion. How many members remember the protests outside this Parliament in the days of the Goss Government?

Mr Swarten: Where were you?

Mr HEGARTY: I am asking the member for Rockhampton whether he remembers. He was here then. I was not a member at that time.

Mr Swarten: Absolutely.

Mr HEGARTY: I will ask members opposite to reflect on that in due course.

The Borbidge Government learnt from the mistakes of the Goss Government and took the politics out of the fire and ambulance services so that they could concentrate on the job of delivering a superior service to the people of Queensland. That is what this debate is about: the ability of the fire and ambulance services to deliver Queenslanders a superior service. That is the responsibility of Government. In this Parliament, members carry the responsibility of ensuring the best delivery of services to the people in their electorates. The changes proposed in this Bill to the management and operation of the QFRA and the QAS are not designed to deliver on their responsibilities; they are designed to restore the influence of the bureaucracy and restore the capacity for political interference.

Mr Lucas: You don't really mean this. Who wrote this for you? You don't really mean it.

Mr HEGARTY: I can understand the interjections from the other side of the House, because the union factions support them. I understand their obligations.

Before the boards were created by the Borbidge Government, the QFRA and the QAS were run by the bureaucracy and subject to ongoing political interference. Not surprisingly, morale within the ambulance and fire services was at an all-time low and discontent was rife. The appointment of the QFRA and the QAS boards addressed that discontent and addressed the Government's obligation to the community and the members of those services to provide them with input into the management of those services. Those autonomous boards have done a fantastic job. I am sure that members on both sides of the House would not disagree with that statement.

By way of example, I point out that two short years ago the QFRA board slashed the Treasury debt burden that it inherited from the Goss Government's decision to amalgamate the 82 boards throughout the State from \$17.5m in early 1996 to \$13.5m in February 1998. Despite that achievement, the Minister has accused the QFRA board of financial mismanagement and, under the guise of a report that the Minister has actively suppressed—despite repeated calls for it from the Opposition and other stakeholders—has claimed that the QFRA is flawed and will face a debt of \$118m

in six years' time. I note that, in his contribution to this debate, the member for Ferny Grove highlighted that fact. He also spoke in favour of the findings of the report. That leads me to ask: have certain members on the Government side of the House seen the report—the report that is being denied to Opposition members of the House? Either that is the case or the member for Ferny Grove is peddling the line that the Minister has given him.

Mr Robertson: We're really going to have to give you a history lesson.

Mr HEGARTY: I am interested in history, but I do not know whether the member can inform me.

How can this Parliament place any confidence in those claims or this Bill when the QFRA board, the Parliament and the public are not afforded the opportunity to see that mystery report? The sacking of the QAS board exposes beyond any doubt the Minister's motives. The only excuse given was that she did not feel the board system worked. Considering it from the Minister's perspective, it would not work, because it vetoes political interference and allows for some sincere and effective management of two essential services. When the minority Labor Government sought office, the now Premier promised an accountable Government and a Government of integrity. His Minister for Emergency Services' actions are far from accountable and they lack any integrity following that action.

Despite the job they have done, the QFRA and the QAS boards have fallen victim to the minority Beattie Government's penchant for sacking qualified, respected and competent boards in the name of blatant political interference. Under this Bill, if it is carried, Queenslanders will see another two boards consigned to the Beattie Government's rapidly filling dustbin, joining the Queensland Livestock and Meat Authority and the Queensland Tourist and Travel Corporation. In fact, the Minister's political manoeuvres throughout this issue have highlighted just how treacherous the Labor Party is in Government—and that is with the handbrake on. Relying on the Independent members for Supply and confidence is the only brake that this Government has on it at this time. This Bill provides all Queenslanders—and particularly the people of Mulgrave—with another example of why the Beattie Government cannot be trusted to govern in its own right. It does not govern in a transparent and accountable fashion as a minority Government and it certainly will not govern in a transparent and accountable fashion if it is given the opportunity to govern as a majority Government.

Under this Bill, the management of Queensland fire and ambulance services will be neither enhanced nor improved. There will be no gains for Queenslanders. All that this Bill will achieve is the opening of the way for political interference, for ALP factional fighting and for the dead hand of bureaucracy. I urge the two Independent members and One Nation members to see this Bill for what it is: a blatant attempt to disregard the autonomous and effective management of the QFRA and the QAS and to take Queensland's fire and ambulance services back to the bad old days. If the Minister wants to regain the confidence of members on this side of the House in relation to her handling of this issue, all she has to do is table that Pricewaterhouse-Coopers report so that all members can see it and form an opinion on the report's recommendations. If she fails to do that, we can only believe that it is for purely political motives that these changes are being put forward. I urge all members to oppose the Bill on those grounds.
