



Speech by

**Mrs E. CUNNINGHAM**

**MEMBER FOR GLADSTONE**

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Hansard 12 November 1998

**EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

**Mrs LIZ CUNNINGHAM** (Gladstone—IND) (3.44 p.m.): I want to raise a couple of issues in relation to this Bill. It is one that was only recently reviewed under the previous Government. At the time, I raised some concerns about the accountability structure that the new proposal brought in, that is, the statutory body proposal. The concern that I raised at that time was that the further removed from Government the board was, the less responsive and the less accountable it would be. It is very important that emergency services providers are not only well attuned to community needs but are also quick and responsive.

My concern at the time was about a trend in all Government instrumentalities to move away from the political arena and separate the structure from political influence. There is a plus to that. It keeps the boards and the entities impartial, but it also is very easy for those people when in a situation of critical need to approach the elected representative of the area for that need to be remedied. That representative then goes to the respective Minister, whoever it may be and of whatever political persuasion, and the Minister can quite easily say, "I cannot affect that; it is not my responsibility; it is hands off; that is the board's decision." The board then makes its decision purely on financial and revenue bases and not on human beings—not on people. That is a factor that is easily left out when politicians are taken out of the equation.

The downside of the politicians' influence is the pork-barrelling and the wrong allocation of resources, but again I reiterate that I expressed those concerns at the time—the fact that the structure was perhaps going to be less accountable because of its removal from FOI access and the fact that, without political influence, it is easy to make decisions only on the basis of dollars and cents. It is my understanding that this change that the Minister is proposing will bring it back so that elected members will at least have some influence.

I have to say that the Minister has been very cooperative in dealing with my inquiries to her office and in providing answers, and I thank her for that. I have a generic concern. It is a worry when a report is referred to but is not tabled and nobody knows of its detail or how the result is achieved, but the Minister is saying that, on the basis of that report, there are significant problems. Without wishing to cause any affront to the Minister, this is a very confrontationist approach to Parliament and it is very easy for a misconception to be built that the statements are being made for political reasons as opposed to service provision reasons. I acknowledge that the Minister gave me the executive summary of that report, but I know that the comment has been made in a couple of quarters that it is difficult to quantify how critical the financial state of the service is when the supporting documentation is not available publicly. I would have to say that that is a criticism that has some value.

I want to comment on only one other area. I notice that, in the new structure being proposed, there is a clear reference to a union delegate being the representative of the firefighters. I remember that, under the previous Minister's original structure, it was not going to be a union delegate and it was not necessarily going to be an operational firefighter; it was going to be a nominated person. An amendment was passed to ensure that that representative was an operational firefighter. That is still my preference. I have no doubt that that will not occur because the Minister's Bill said that it will be a union representative. I am very firmly of the belief that it should be an operational firefighter who has a say in the decision-making process if only to bring home the day-to-day constraints, pressures and realities of the emergency services area.

Those people work in very pressured situations; they go home with many unpleasant memories that they have to cope with. I know that there are support services within the various services—ambulance, firefighting and police. People who work in the ambulance and firefighting areas in particular face some horrendous situations. All three services are usually called out in sad or at least critical situations, so it is important that we provide for them the best structure that we possibly can. Those services are often provided under the most difficult circumstances. They deserve our consideration. They deserve our best efforts.

Those are all the comments that I wanted to make. However, I do want to thank the Minister for the availability of her staff and for the answers to my questions. As this service progresses, we need to ensure that we make decisions for the benefit of all those people who work in the services, not for party political gain.

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