



Speech by

Hon. MERRI ROSE

MEMBER FOR CURRUMBIN

Hansard 12 November 1998

EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Hon. M. ROSE (Currumbin—ALP) (Minister for Emergency Services) (3.50 p.m.), in reply: I thank all members who participated in the debate. I will respond to a number of comments made by Opposition members. I refer to the comments made by the member for Mirani, whose opening remarks were that he could not possibly support a Bill for the abolition of independent community input. That is not what this Bill is about. We are establishing an Emergency Services Advisory Council; we are not trying to take out community input at all. As a matter of fact, ESAC will be more reflective of community input.

The constant comments made by Opposition members about the sacking of the boards are just not true. The Bill abolishes a structure which is not working. I have never denigrated the members of the board. In the past and at Estimates committee hearings, when the same insinuation was made, I acknowledged the work put in by board members. I know that many of them were frustrated that they could not make a decision because of constant political interference. All one has to do to find that out is talk to some of the board members. It was not a question of sacking the board or the board members. This Bill is about abolishing a board structure.

The board structure is being abolished because of corporate governance failings evident in both the QAS and QFRA administrative arrangements and because of the need for an improved mechanism for broader community input. Not only were the corporate governance failings identified by independent consultants Pricewaterhouse-Coopers; only weeks ago they were acknowledged by the Queensland Audit Office. The member for Mirani also talked about the politics of the decision. I do not know where this conspiracy theory about factions being involved in this decision comes from. I am just baffled as to where that even comes from.

This decision does not represent a return to bureaucratic control. Under this Bill, the Chief Commissioner of the QFRA and the Commissioner of the QAS retain exactly the same functions. They have responsibility for operational decision making. There is no change for firefighters or ambulance officers on the ground. This Bill removes an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy from both statutory authorities by the removal of the boards. The Bill strengthens the corporate governance arrangements. The saving of in excess of \$300,000 through the removal of the boards will be returned to operational service delivery, and the Emergency Services Advisory Council is an improved model for community input.

I commissioned the independent report within a few days of assuming the Emergency Services portfolio. I note the comments made by the member for Gladstone, and I will address those shortly. The PricewaterhouseCoopers report confirmed the parlous state of the QFRA Trust Fund. I have said this many times in the Parliament and I said it during the Estimates committee hearing. That was not the only report which identified the parlous financial state of the fund. The Masters report, which was commissioned by the coalition Government, did also. The Masters report was never released publicly, but it was tabled by the then Opposition. That report also confirmed that the QFRA was going to spiral into debt, and the previous Government did absolutely nothing about it. As I said before, there were some board members who were keen to do something about it, but they kept getting political interference and their hands were tied.

Mr Malone: In six years' time.

Mrs ROSE: But we cannot make decisions just about this financial year. We have to look at the future. I have not said that it will be in debt in this financial year. I have said that if we do not do something to address the situation, the fund will be in debt to the tune of \$112m within six years. We cannot ignore that. We cannot just keep saying, "Everything is okay because it is in the black now." How do we plan for the future?

Mr Malone interjected.

Mrs ROSE: It has to be fixed up now. One of the reasons I have not released the report is that I am working on a financial rescue package with both the Premier and the Treasurer, and I do not believe that it is appropriate to release it at this time. That is the reason I have not released the report.

The member for Redlands again talked about party factions in the QAS and the QFRA and said that the boards took politics out of services. They did not take the politics out; they took accountability out. The previous Government did not take out the politics; it abrogated its responsibility to the people of Queensland by the establishment of the boards. As I said, the Masters report showed a debt of \$35m. It was not just the PricewaterhouseCoopers report.

The member for Charters Towers talked about a lot of the same issues. As a matter of fact, I thought it was the same speech as the one made by the member for Redlands.

Mr Schwarten: It was.

Mrs ROSE: It seemed like the first five minutes were exactly the same. I think the member for Redlands must have handed him his speech. The member for Charters Towers also referred to the PricewaterhouseCoopers report and the fact that it has not been tabled. I mentioned before that the Queensland Audit Office has also expressed its concern. A letter recently sent by the Queensland Audit Office states in part—

"The Director-General therefore had financial accountability for the two authorities but no direct operational responsibility. Conversely, the boards of the two statutory authorities had operational responsibility without direct financial accountability."

That is exactly the reason we are going to abolish the boards: to establish some accountability. The other contributions made by members of the Opposition mostly related to the PricewaterhouseCoopers report.

The Queensland Ambulance Service and the QFRA provide essential services that are publicly funded. The boards were unelected and were unaccountable. The Minister of the day should be in a position to make important decisions. The commissioners will be allowed to get on with the job and manage their services as they currently are, and the Bill does not change their role. As I said before, what the members opposite have neglected to mention, and what my colleague the member for Rockhampton revealed, is that the Labor Government slashed the debt from \$57.3m to less than \$20m. Labor reduced it by more than 60%.

The rationale for the Bill was and is to address corporate governance failings evident in the board structures of both the QFRA and the QAS. The other important reason was to broaden the community input into the delivery of emergency services through the establishment of the Emergency Services Advisory Council. The member for Ipswich West is supporting the abolition of the boards. He is also supporting the establishment of the Emergency Services Advisory Council. I thank him for that support.

I note the concerns of the member for Gladstone about not publicly releasing the report. As to the reason for that—I suppose that I have exercised my discretion not to do that at this time. I am sure that the member would acknowledge that I did make available to her the executive summary. The member also said that she believes the union delegate should be an operational person. I agree absolutely. I give the member an assurance that both of the union delegates will be operational people. Again, I thank all members for their contributions.
