



Speech by

Mr ROB MITCHELL

MEMBER FOR CHARTERS TOWERS

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MINISTER FOR EMERGENCY SERVICES

Mr MITCHELL (Charters Towers—NPA) (6.35 p.m.): I rise to support the motion before the House tonight and, in doing so, I also express my support for the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority and its board. The Minister's amendment made no mention of the board, which is what it is all about. We know that the fire and rescue services and the rural fire services—as the previous speaker has mentioned—do a great job. However, this motion is about the handling of the board.

The minority Labor Government came to office only three months ago, but in that short time the people of Queensland have already seen a return to the bad old days of the Goss regime. It appears that Labor learnt nothing during its recent years in Opposition. It has returned to the bullyboy days—the days of mischief, misinformation and mistruths. Notable among the Cabinet of the minority Labor Government is the current Minister for Emergency Services. That Minister has an agenda to destabilise and eventually disband the board of the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority, which is trying to run the fire service as it should be run—well and truly above politics. I put to the House that the Minister's behaviour harks back to the days of former Minister Tom Burns. When one looks at the Minister's handling of this matter, one could be forgiven for thinking that she has spent some time as an understudy at the Tom Burns' school of finesse.

The Minister stood in this Chamber and claimed that within five years the fire service will be in debt to the tune of \$118m. The Minister said that that claim was backed up by a report that was prepared by PricewaterhouseCoopers. I might add that that report, which cost \$49,000, was paid for by the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority. Like so many reports that do not suit the minority Labor Government's political position, the report was suppressed from the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority and the Queensland public. The Minister has proved all too willing to offer selective quotes that suit her political agenda, but she has not proved willing to release the entire report. Why not? Perhaps she will do what the other 17 Ministers have done and form a task force. That seems to be the way to get around that particular problem. The Minister has not released the report because it does not suit her agenda or that of the Labor Party.

I remind members of some facts about the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority, which previous speakers have already mentioned. I need to do this because these are crucial to the intent of our motion. When the previous Labor Government amalgamated the 82 boards throughout the State, it also amalgamated a debt worth around \$60m in its entirety. This fact has been backed by the member for Rockhampton who, on 31 August 1996, stated—

"Regrettably, the other thing that the Labor Government amalgamated was the debt, which ended up being around \$60m. The amount was made up of an operating debt of around \$29.6m and an overdraft of \$27.7m—about \$56m. I am the first to admit that that was an enormous impost to throw onto the back of the Fire Service."

In 1996, the member for Rockhampton and the Labor Party not only knew about the debt but regretted it, yet the current Minister claims to have no knowledge of it at all—like a few other things that she claims not to know about. We have heard that when the coalition took office in 1996 the debt had been reduced to \$17.5m. We have also heard that by the time the Beattie Government took office the debt had been reduced to \$13.5m. The debt is still being serviced, and serviced well, by the board.

Members should remember that the trust fund is not in debt. In fact, as has been said on numerous occasions in this House, the trust fund budget came in at \$18m in the black due to the good management of the board of the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority. The board does not deserve the public maligning that the Minister has given it. Tonight the House should be paying tribute to that board. Rather than creating mischief, the Minister should do the honourable thing and release the report. The Minister should also apologise to the board for the unjust criticism that she has afforded to it. As I said, this motion is about the board; it is not about fire service workers. We all know the tremendous job that they do. I have a lot of great mates who work in the fire service, and we support them wholeheartedly.

To take up what the member for Fitzroy said; I believe that it might be a good move to make the rural fire division a separate entity. Members of the rural fire division are all honorary and they do a wonderful job, and perhaps that would be a good thing. I believe that in its current form, the board is doing a wonderful job.
