



Speech by

**Mr ROB MITCHELL**

**MEMBER FOR CHARTERS TOWERS**

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Hansard 12 November 1998

**EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

**Mr MITCHELL** (Charters Towers—NPA) (3.21 p.m.): I rise to speak against this Bill, because I absolutely oppose any plan that waters down industry and community involvement in the operations of our very successful Queensland Ambulance Service and the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority. The real motive behind the Bill is quite obvious to all members in this Chamber. Of course, those opposite will deny it, but as has been mentioned on numerous occasions, the motivation for this Bill is purely political.

The Bill is not about improving the performance of the QAS or the QFRA, and it is not motivated by any genuine concerns for the numerous ambulance and fire officers throughout the State. Indeed, most of those officers did not know that this was happening until the announcement was made. The Bill is motivated by backroom dealings, and it is a disgrace that ambulance and fire personnel have to be the victims and the guinea pigs of the Minister's little power games. The Minister has decided to denigrate two boards in an attempt to disguise the real ALP factional manoeuvrings that are going on behind the scenes.

On 18 September, when the Minister introduced this Bill to the House, she said that it was necessary because of flaws identified by an independent report—the mysterious independent report—into the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority trust fund.

**Mrs Rose:** You're all giving the same speech.

**Mr MITCHELL:** We are still looking for the report that nobody has seen. As soon as we can find the report, we might be able to change things a little. I will elaborate on that shortly.

If the Minister's statement is correct, why is she also choosing to axe the board of the Queensland Ambulance Service? It would appear that she is trying to knife the Ambulance Service in the back through the charade that she is playing out in relation to the fire service. If the Minister genuinely believed the myth that the fire board was flawed, she would only have to introduce this Bill in relation to the fire board. However, the Minister has decided that the Bill should encompass both the fire and the ambulance services. Clearly, the so-called flaw in the fire board, which is the stated reason for the Bill's introduction, is nothing more than a myth, and it has been exposed as such.

The myth was further exposed when the Minister was asked to table a copy of the so-called independent report that we hear so much about but have not seen, which supposedly highlighted financial problems. Not once has the Minister tabled the report. The Minister even snubbed the Estimates Committee when members asked for a copy so that they could gauge the appropriateness of the allocations in the program statements. Clearly, the Minister has something to hide. She is hiding the report and who knows what else, although we all know that she is certainly hiding the truth.

The only document that has been made public in relation to the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority has been a leaked interdepartmental memo that confirmed that the board had performed extremely competently, contrary to what members opposite have said this afternoon. The memo was prepared by Mr Rod Wilson, the financial services director of the department, and was addressed to the chief commissioner, Mr Wayne Hartley. It was dated just one day prior to the day that the Minister announced that she would sack the boards.

**Mr Hegarty:** Has he been sacked—the bloke who leaked the memo?

**Mr MITCHELL:** He might be the next to go. The memo praised the QFRA board, saying that its members have significantly reduced a debt commitment from \$59m in 1992 to \$12.5m this year. The memo went on to confirm to the chief commissioner that the board had met all the requirements of the Financial Administration and Audit Act. That is the official report card on the QFRA. The memo set out what the director and the department's financial services section had to say just one day before the Minister sacked the board. Apparently the Minister knew better. She ignored the praise of her department and, instead, set about politicising the QFRA and the QAS. When she was called upon to justify her mischievous claims that the board had somehow been incompetent, she backtracked and refused to table the so-called independent report. The report still has not seen the light of day. I ask the Minister: can we see the report?

**Mrs Rose:** When Mick Veivers was the Minister, did he table the Masters report?

**Mr MITCHELL:** I know that the member for Southport would have done the right thing. I for one would definitely like to see the report, as everything seems to be based on it.

It is the height of hypocrisy that the Labor Party now feigns concern about the board structure, because when the boards were set up the Labor Party in this Chamber stated quite clearly that it had no objection to the structure. Now, members opposite pretend to have all sorts of concerns. They now pretend that the boards were somehow mismanaged. Most of us will remember very well the debate for strong union representation on the board.

**Mr Schwarten:** Every waking minute of the day you worry about it.

**Mr MITCHELL:** The member for Rockhampton was one of the main proponents for that position. He got to his feet to push for strong representation of his union mates.

**Mr Veivers:** Which we gave him.

**Mr MITCHELL:** We did. All members of the QFRA are members of the union. Members opposite argued for about three hours on nothing.

This Bill actually flies in the face of honesty. It is an insult not only to the fire and ambulance workers, who all know the real motivation behind the Bill. It is an insult to all Queenslanders that the Minister has consistently refused to be accountable for her claims. That is a further insult because the Government is making a deliberate attempt to do away with community and industry input into the fire and ambulance services. Instead, the Government is proposing to bring the whole operation back under the control of a centralised Brisbane department. Once again, the Labor Party is trying to decentralise all services, just as it did from 1989 to 1995.

If passed, this Bill will bring the politics back into the fire and ambulance services. Yet again, the various factions within the ALP will fight for control and the direction of our most important emergency services. The Bill must be defeated because it attacks the independence and openness of the QAS and the QFRA. It must be defeated because it is based on a fraudulent claim by the Minister that she has so far failed to sustain. It is based on an independent mystery report that nobody seems to know anything about.

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