



Speech by

Hon. R. SCHWARTEN

MEMBER FOR ROCKHAMPTON

Hansard 17 September 1998

MINISTER FOR EMERGENCY SERVICES

Hon. R. E. SCHWARTEN (Rockhampton— ALP) (Minister for Public Works and Minister for Housing) (6.47 p.m.): It is with a great deal of pleasure that I enter the debate. Having been quoted as an authority on this issue tonight by so many of those who sit opposite, it is indeed a great pleasure to be here. I cannot understand why anybody would vote against the Minister's motion, because to do so simply means that all of those members who vote against this motion do not have any respect for the hard and dangerous work carried out by our firefighters. I do not think that is what members really want to do.

The original motion put by the Opposition states that "this House condemns the Minister for Emergency Services for the unjustified attacks that she has made on this board". Tonight, not one member has been able to cite an example of what this unjustified attack was. What was said by this Minister that can be construed in any shape or form as an attack on either the firefighters or this board?

I spoke for about an hour in the debate when the board was introduced. I am on record as saying that it was set up as a buffer between the Minister and the firefighters simply to take the political heat off the Minister. If we consider the election promises made in 1995, we see that things such as one-in-three and pay increases were promised; the world was going to be rosy for firefighters as a result of the election of the Borbidge Government. We know that that could not be delivered.

The Staib report came and went and the underfunding was uncovered, but no money poured from the Treasury. The Treasurer at that time, "Aunty Joan", did not hand out any money from the purse. That did not happen. What was to be done? Someone said, "I know. Create a board. Let them take the flak. Let them wander around the State and meet people." But it did not happen that way. As all of us know, we can try to divest ourselves of all our responsibilities and stand back mute and absurd and say, "It's nothing to do with me. The board made that decision", but if the board did not get the dough in the first place it could not possibly function. That is what happened.

If that constitutes an attack upon the board, so be it. But the fact of the matter is: that is why it was established. It did not improve the lot of the people who worked in the fire service. Not one person who has spoken in this debate tonight has evidenced their remarks with one example of where firefighters were better off as a result of having a board, of where the fire board made a decision that could not have been made by either the director-general or the Fire Commissioner. Where is the value adding that this board brought? What difference did it make?

How much did this board cost? I heard the honourable member for Murrumba say \$100,000. I do not know where he got that figure from, but presumably that is the sort of money involved. I do not want to knock the board, but we have to weigh up whether it is better to spend money on a board that makes decisions that can be ably made by one person or whether it is better to have one person do the job and put that money back into the Fire and Rescue Authority.

From talking to the firefighters out there—and I know lots of them—I understand that they have not noticed any great advantage from having a board—any advantage at all, in fact. They still go to work and they still do not have one-in-three as a result of having a fire board. Nothing has changed in that regard. The most disgraceful thing was that the coalition did not even have the decency to have the union represented on the board. I moved an amendment to that effect at the time, but it was not

supported by the coalition. So the board was not even representative of the people it was supposed to be helping.

As far as I and those on this side of the House are concerned, the motion put up by the Opposition tonight is a sham. Let us see if those opposite really want to vote against a motion of confidence in the firefighters of this State, those hardworking people who go out day after day and risk their lives.

At the moment members of the road rescue team from Rockhampton are over in Chicago competing in the world games, and I am very proud to be associated with those people. They are not there because of the board.

Time expired.
