



Speech by

Hon. R. SCHWARTEN

MEMBER FOR ROCKHAMPTON

Hansard 12 November 1998

EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Hon. R. E. SCHWARTEN (Rockhampton— ALP) (Minister for Public Works and Minister for Housing) (3.28 p.m.): I never thought that I would have to revisit this debate. However, seeing as so many wrongs have been told against my good self today, I will correct the record.

The reality is that all speakers from the other side of the House have failed to establish one critical point, which is how the board system has made it better for the fire or the ambulance. How have the people of Queensland been better off under that system than they were under the previous system? Until members opposite can establish that and quantify it in terms of turnout time, the number of lives saved or any other benchmark that they wish to use, they are blowing into the breeze.

The reality is that about \$700,000 has been spent. The former Minister would know how many appliances that would buy for the bush fire brigade—probably about seven or eight. That money could have gone towards a couple of fire packs; they are worth about \$400,000. We could have put on a few more fires. That is the debate that members opposite do not want to have. In reality, what value did it get from that board? Aside from traipsing around Queensland and acting like a latter-day cocktail circuit, what else did it do? Despite the best intentions of those people on the board, it did not produce the result that former Minister Veivers was expecting.

In my speech at that time I said that I was prepared to give it a go; the theory was that the wider the tentacles were spread into the community the better the feedback would be and the whole organisation would become more responsive. By any fair measure or analysis of the whole system, that simply did not occur. The former Minister did not need to bring in a consultant, such as Ms Staib—and pay her a fortune—to work that out; he just had to talk to a few fires or ambulances. They would tell us that their life was no better as a result of that board being put in place and that they would prefer the system under which they were accountable to the CEO, whether it be the commissioner for the ambulance service or the commissioner for the fire service. That is the system of straight-line response that they are used to and that they want.

At the time, I warned that the board was being set up as a shield to shield the Minister from what was known. A lot of promises were made back in 1995. The world was going to be a better place because the National Party rorted its way into Government back in 1996. It promised that there would be one in three right throughout the State in every first-response vehicle. It was nonsense, and the Opposition knew it. When Littleproud made those promises, he knew damned well that he was not going to be able to deliver. The poor old member for Southport was the one who had to try to deliver them without having any money.

What was the former Minister's solution? He decided to establish a board to take the flak. We all know that boards are not effective for taking the flak. In reality, the Minister was going to cop it anyway because people still see this service as a necessary Government service. It does not matter how many people are placed on a board to defend a Minister; it simply does not work.

As there has been a revisitation of past events, I wish to correct the record. One honourable member mentioned treachery. That member should read the speech that I made when I was sitting where the former Minister is sitting now. I predicted exactly what would occur, that is, the de facto sacking of Geoff Skerrett. Two promises were made in the sneaky MOU that was made with the UFU at that time. One was that they would get rid of Keliher; the other was that they would get rid of Skerrett.

Keliher is now in New South Wales. He was sacked by a 16 year-old-kid in bike pants. That is what happened. That is the reality. The Minister would not front him, because the Premier of the day said, "No, don't you sack him."

Mr VEIVERS: I rise to a point of order. I find that remark totally incorrect, and I ask that it be withdrawn.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Dr Clark): Order! What part does the member find personally offensive?

Mr SCHWARTEN: I do not care. I will withdraw it, because I have a bit more to say. The reality is that that person was sacked——

Mr Veivers interjected.

Mr SCHWARTEN: Leo Keliher was not sacked by the former Minister. Leo Keliher was sacked by a kid in bike pants, who took the message up there looking for a Dr Gallagher. He did not even know his name. When Dr Keliher sought to have a meeting with the former Minister, he was nowhere to be found. In common with Howard Hobbs and all of the others who sacked their DGs, you—a big front row forward like you—hid under your desk. And what a big desk it must have been!

Mr VEIVERS: I rise to a point of order. I find that remark offensive.

Mr SCHWARTEN: Of course you find it offensive; it was meant to be offensive. I withdraw.

Mr VEIVERS: I ask that the member withdraws those remarks.

Mr SCHWARTEN: I will withdraw, because I have a bit more to say.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! I ask the member to direct his comments through the Chair.

Mr SCHWARTEN: Certainly. I will try not to be offensive to you, Madam Deputy Speaker; otherwise you might throw me out.

The reason that we opposed that legislation at that time was that it was designed to square up with Skerritt. There was no other reason for it. That is why the Act was changed at that time. What happened? Skerritt went without a job. Suddenly, off he went. The two deals that were made with the UFU—Keliher gone, Skerritt gone—were delivered, and part of the vehicle used to do it was this structure. It did not work. When members stand up in this place and say that I supported this——

Mr Veivers interjected.

Mr SCHWARTEN: No, I said that I was prepared to give it a go. However, I made a prediction that that would happen, and it did. I am no Nostradamus, but I knew what was going to happen; the dogs were barking it. The junior fires in Cape York told me.

Honourable members interjected.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! I call the House to order!

Mr SCHWARTEN: So you should. Thank you very much for your protection, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Members opposite can pontificate all day about how the service was better under their Government. However, the reality was that it did not improve, because they did not front load the cash into it. During one of the first conversations that I had with the former Minister when I was a shadow Minister, I told him how short of dough he would be. I will give him full marks; he tried to get the money off old mother Sheldon, but it did not work. The former Minister tried to get out of it by creating a board so that it would take the bullet.

Mr VEIVERS: I rise to a point of order. Not once did I ever try to get out of anything. I did not form a board for that reason. I find the remarks quite incorrect, and I ask for them to be withdrawn.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! Which remarks does the member find offensive?

Mr SCHWARTEN: I do not care. I will withdraw it anyway.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! There is no point of order.

Mr SCHWARTEN: It does not matter. I know that the former Minister did try his best, but the reality was that he had no support from his Government, the then Premier or the then Treasurer to address the problem—something that this Minister has. The solution to the problem was not to form another board and not to invest seven-tenths of a million dollars into people traipsing around the State theoretically running fire and ambulance services, listening to the community and taking on board what they had to say. The community was saying, "We demand a higher level of services." The UFU, the ambos union and the MWU were all saying the same thing: "We want more ambulance officers. We want more fire officers. We want better stations. We want them in different locations." Those things all cost money.

Back then, in my speech I admitted that the problem that has always plagued those services was a lack of finances. It did not matter, though, because when we did inject money into the fire service, nothing we tried to do met with the approval of the then management of the UFU. That was the reality, and at that stage the former Minister tried to get himself out of it. Today the Opposition is opposing this Minister's attempt to try to get the system back on the rails and get some single-line accountability back into it. If the former Minister had left the system alone at the time when he came into Government, I believe it would have been all right, that the broad management procedure put into place would have worked. Not one of the speakers today has been able to show that we got \$700,000 worth of value from that board—not one of them.

Mr Lucas: How many fires did it put out quicker for \$700,000?

Mr SCHWARTEN: I do not think it put out one extra fire. It did not get one more kid to the hospital quicker. It did not pay one more wage of an ambulance officer, fire officer or anybody else. It did not make one iota of improvement to that service. Members opposite should not pontificate. They are opposing this legislation for purely political reasons. By 1995——

Mr Seeney interjected.

Mr SCHWARTEN: The honourable member should just listen to this. He was not around at that stage, so he might just learn something if he listens. One thing that he should learn is that he should only interject from his correct seat. That is the first thing he should do, and he should pay a bit of attention, as I do, to the protocols of the Parliament.

By 1995 the debt that we inherited was less than halved to approximately \$20m. The bloke that the former Government sacked was able to achieve that. What was his reward for that? It was the sack! Both he and Keliher got the sack. Where is the benchmark? That is our benchmark of what we achieved in that time. Where is the \$700,000, which the former Government invested in that board, reflected in an outcome such as that? The answer is: it is not there.

At the same time as we achieved that, remember this: we increased funding to rural fire brigades from about \$1m to nearly \$9m, I think it was, by the time we left Government. When we came to Government—and all of those opposite know this; this is true, there is no doubt about it—I went out to the electorate of the honourable member and had a look at some fire appliances. Before we came to Government no attention was paid to rural fire brigades. We were able to achieve an outcome such as that while halving the debt.

I could go on and on about the benchmarks that could be applied to this particular exercise, but I am not going to do that. The reality is that I am wasting my time, because for purely political reasons the Opposition has made up its mind to oppose this Bill. I say to members opposite that they should go back to each of their constituencies, knock on the door of the ambulance and fire stations and say, "We are opposed to this because we think the board really made your life better. We really wanted to keep that board because it made you a lot happier. It made you a lot more secure in your job. It made you better at training. It gave you better appliances." I know that not one of them will be game to do that because those people will show them the door. They will tell honourable members opposite, as they tell me, that it was a waste of money and it delivered no outcome to them or to the people of Queensland.
