



Speech by

Mr T. MALONE

MEMBER FOR MIRANI

Hansard 17 September 1998

MINISTER FOR EMERGENCY SERVICES

Mr MALONE (Mirani—NPA) (6 p.m.): I move—

"That this House recognises the valuable contribution being made by the Board of the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority; and

That this House condemns the Minister for Emergency Services for the unjustified attacks that she has made on this Board."

I have moved this motion tonight because I believe that all Queenslanders have found the Minister's performance in recent months, in attacking the QFRA board, to be nothing short of a disgrace. The Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority itself is bracing for a return to the bad old days of low morale. It is bracing itself for a return to the days when its employees were treated with such contempt and scorn that Hansard would not allow me to use the words that the then Labor Minister, Tom Burns, used publicly to describe them.

In recent weeks, we have seen from the Minister what can only be described as the most appalling, dishonest performance of any Minister in this Government. The performance has either been dishonest or it has been a worrying sign of the Minister's inability to come to grips with her portfolio. Her claim that the Fire and Rescue Authority will be in debt to the tune of \$118m within five years is highly questionable. The Minister has quoted from a report prepared by PricewaterhouseCoopers. I ask: where is this report? It is nowhere to be seen. It is obviously hidden. It has not been released to the public. As a matter of fact, the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority, which I believe has to pay something like \$49,000 for the report, has not even seen a copy of it.

I challenge the Minister to table a copy of that report, put it on the public record and let everyone read its entire contents—not just read selected lines that she may wish to use in her press releases. If she wants to make these claims, let us see the report in its entirety. I ask: why should it remain hidden? There is a reason why the Minister does not want this report released. She does not want it released because she wants to be able to selectively quote from it, and she wants to selectively quote so that she can paint a misleading picture of the board, and particularly the QFRA, to enable her to discredit them. Why would the Minister want to discredit the board? Is it because she wants to remove the board—the entire board structure—and perhaps return the Fire and Rescue Authority to the complete control of the Public Service? Does she want to do away with community and firemen's input into Queensland's now very highly regarded Fire and Rescue Authority?

The time has come to expose the Minister's fictitious claims, and I will use the words of her ministerial colleague to do that. For weeks now, the Minister has made some fictitious and particularly outrageous claims that the coalition Government left a so-called black hole in the Fire and Rescue Authority. She has insinuated that this has been the fault of the board. My colleague and former Minister for Emergency Services, Mick Veivers, has gone to great lengths to point out that the only debt that remains is an inherited debt—a debt which is totally serviceable from the trust fund, and the trust fund is not in debt. But the Minister will not listen to this. The Minister has continued to deny this. The Minister has continued to deny that there is an inherited debt.

I refer to Hansard of 31 October 1996 and will quote to the House the words of the then shadow Minister for Emergency Services, Robert Schwarten, to see where this debt really came from. When speaking to the Fire Service Amendment Bill, he made the following confession—a confession that all members will be interested to hear. This is where the debt came from. The then Labor shadow Minister said—

"The Labor Government bit the bullet and on 1 July 1990 amalgamated the 82 boards throughout the State and put them all under the control of one authority."

Now here comes the good bit. He went on—

"Regrettably"—

and I will say that again—

"Regrettably, the other thing that the Labor Government amalgamated was the debt, which ended up being around \$60m."

The then shadow Minister continued—

"The amount was made up of an operating debt of around \$29.6m and an overdraft of \$27.7m—about \$56m"—

in total. He repeated—

"I am the first to admit that that was an enormous impost to throw onto the back of the Fire Service."

There we have it once and for all. The debt was an inherited debt that was imposed on the fire service by the Labor Government. That was something that the Labor Party regretted in 1996, but now it claims to have no knowledge of it.

When the coalition took office in 1996, the fire service debt to Treasury was \$17.5m. When the Beattie Government took over only three months ago, the coalition had reduced that debt even further to \$13.5m. That represents a reduction of \$4m in just over two years. Let me make one thing very clear: the trust fund is not in debt. Payments are being made to service that debt to Treasury. Those repayments are being met, and they have not put the trust fund in debt. In fact, as the former Minister pointed out this morning, this year's trust fund budget came in at \$18m in the black—in the black—resulting from an \$11m carryover and \$7m in savings through good management, that is, the good management of the QFRA board. I believe that the board members must be congratulated on their efforts in those two years.

It is very interesting that the members of the board—the very same board that has been given a bill for \$49,000 for this report—have not even been allowed to see the report. They have no idea of the terms of reference of the report, and they have no idea of the scope of the report. They have no idea what the report was supposed to look at, and they have no idea whether the supposed projected black hole is a result of having to factor in Labor's pre-election promises. In fact, no-one has any idea about what the report is or what it says, because no-one has actually seen the report. It remains under lock and key.

It is important for everyone in the Chamber to be aware that the deliberately provocative actions of the Minister are threatening to undermine the morale of the Fire and Rescue Authority. Everyone would recall the disgrace that all Queenslanders had to witness when the former Goss Government treated the firefighters with such contempt that they rallied—in uniform—outside this House. I notice that the former Opposition spokesman on Emergency Services has entered the Chamber. Everyone would recall the exact words that the then Minister, Tom Burns, used to describe those firefighters—unfortunately. If the current Minister continues on this path of misinformation, perhaps we will see those same protests again.

Firefighters across Queensland know that this Minister is not doing her job properly, and her Cabinet colleague the Minister for Public Works and Minister for Housing obviously knows that better than anyone else. The insinuations being made by the Minister are very clear. They are an unjustified attack on the board and a very grubby attempt to undermine the credibility of its members—members whose standing in the community is of the highest order.

The Minister's comments have been part of a sly and slimy attempt to discredit the board of the QFRA before implementing perhaps her ultimate plan to abolish it. But let me remind the Minister that the board cannot be abolished without a change to the legislation. And before the Minister even entertains the thought of abolishing the board, let me remind her again of the words of the former Labor spokesman for Emergency Services in 1996. He said—

"I reiterate that the Opposition"—

that is, the Labor Party—

"does not have any real difficulty with the concept of creating an authority to oversight the fire service."

Tonight's motion not only condemns the Minister for her unjustified attacks but it also recognises the contribution of the QFRA board. Not only has this board reduced the debt that it inherited—

Time expired.