



Speech by

**Mr T. MALONE**

**MEMBER FOR MIRANI**

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Hansard 12 November 1998

### **EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

**Mr MALONE** (Mirani—NPA) (12.53 p.m.): Today I rise to speak against the Emergency Services Legislation Amendment Bill. Since the Government made its intention known in relation to this legislation, I have been outspoken in this Parliament and in the community about the consequences of a Government being determined to abolish any form of independent community input into our valued fire and ambulance services.

The negative impacts of the Emergency Services Legislation Amendment Bill, if passed, will not be confined to any small part of our State but will impact on every community right throughout Queensland. The consequences of this Bill will be disastrous for fire and ambulance personnel across Queensland and will have a negative impact on the level of service that each and every member of our community has a right to expect from both of these great organisations.

The State coalition will oppose the Bill, because it is based entirely on two issues and two issues alone: firstly, innuendo; and, secondly, politics. What is more, the Minister's desperate attempts to defend this Bill have resulted in her making slanderous slurs on the respective board members and their ability to manage the operations of the fire and ambulance services.

In the Minister's second-reading speech there was no truer word spoken than when she stated—

"Today is an important day for the future of all Queenslanders. Perhaps it is the most important, however, for the officers and staff of the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority, the Queensland Ambulance Service and for members of local ambulance committees."

The member was spot-on; it was a very important day. It was an important day because it signalled a reversal of the major reforms that had removed politics from the day-to-day operations of fire and ambulance services. It was also an important day because it marked a return to bureaucratic control and marked the demise of community input. It marked the demise of fire service and Ambulance Service input. It also marked a major backflip on the part of the Labor Party.

Only two years ago, on 31 October 1996, the Labor Party supported the establishment of a separate Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority board and Queensland Ambulance Service board. The then shadow Minister for Emergency Services, Robert Schwarten, now a Cabinet colleague of the Minister's, made the following point very clearly when he told the House—

"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."

The Minister's Cabinet colleague could not have made that point any clearer.

To overcome the embarrassment of a political backflip and to overcome the embarrassment that the proposed dismissal of the boards was being pursued solely for political purposes, the Minister had to invent a reason why she wanted the boards abolished. She chose to invent what is often quoted as an excuse amongst incoming Labor Governments. She chose to assert that the Fire and Rescue Authority Trust fund was in disarray caused by financial mismanagement. Rather than being

honest—and I know the Minister is a very honourable person, but I believe her halo has slipped a little—she chose to muddy the names of those diligent independent board members who had served the fire and ambulance services boards with support from grassroots members.

In recent months, the Minister has claimed that the Fire and Rescue Authority would be facing a debt of \$118m in six years' time. She said that this was her reason for proposing to abolish the board structure. We have to ask where the mysterious \$118m comes from. The Minister claims that she commissioned an independent report into the QFRA's finances by the accounting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers. During her second-reading speech, she even quoted from that report. Unfortunately, we have yet to see that report. I ask: where is the report? It has never been made public. She has never detailed the terms of reference. However, the media has been keen to report on the Minister's assertions, despite the fact that we have never seen the report and that it has never been tabled in this House. We have to ask: why is that the case?

Perhaps the report shows the real story. Perhaps the report details that there is no debt. Perhaps the report shows that, if there is a debt, it may result from the Labor Party's unfunded promises. Perhaps the report is scathing of the Goss Government, which did little to address the debt problems of the fire service. Currently, there is no debt in the trust fund. Even the Budget papers bearing the Minister's signature show that the QFRA is in surplus—a surplus of over \$18m. However, there is one debt, and it should be noted that it is within the trust fund. The QFRA has a debt to Treasury. But let us not blame the QFRA board for that; it was established only two years ago.

If we refer to the Hansard record for October 1996, we see that the then shadow Minister, Robert Schwarten, made the confession that it had been a mistake by the Goss Government to have created a debt for the QFRA. He told the House—

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

He went on to say—and very tellingly—

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

He went on to say—

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

The QFRA board that the Minister now seeks to disband has reduced that debt back from \$17.5m when the coalition took Government in 1996 to \$13.5m in February this year.

Sitting suspended from 1.01 p.m. to 2.30 p.m.

**Mr MALONE:** The Minister now accuses those very same board members of being unable to manage the finances of the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority—the very same people who have reduced the debt that the Labor member for Rockhampton admits was one of the Labor Party's own making. In actual fact, he not only admits it, he regrets it. Unfortunately for him, it is all in Hansard. The Minister claims that the board members have mismanaged the trust fund, despite the fact that the trust fund has a surplus of \$18m which was identified in this Government's own Budget papers. The Minister makes the claim, despite the fact that the very same board has reduced the debt to Treasury—a debt inherited from Labor—by \$5m in just over two years. Ironically, it is not the Labor Party that the Minister accuses of mismanaging the finances; rather, she blames the independent board members, who have spent a huge amount of time and effort in trying to reduce that debt.

The motives of the Minister are reasonably transparent. Her decision to abolish the board structures has nothing at all to do with incompetence or alleged financial mismanagement; it is, indeed, all about politics. When challenged to prove her accusations of financial mismanagement, she declines to do so. The Minister not only refused to provide the public with a copy of the so-called PricewaterhouseCoopers report, but she also failed to provide a copy to the parliamentary Estimates committee. The Minister refused, despite the request from the committee, to provide a copy so that the Budget allocations for the fire service could be properly scrutinised and their appropriateness valued.

Clearly, the Minister has embarked on a deliberate attempt to stymie any form of scrutiny in regard to the Fire and Rescue Authority. As I said earlier, I believe that the Minister is an honourable person, but I believe also that, because she has not made those papers available, that would have to suggest that she has something to hide. Maybe it has something to do with the Labor Party factional deals that we hear so much about that are being woven into the policy of abandoning the board structure.

If the Minister was so adamant that the boards have failed, then does it not stand to reason that she should table the findings of that report to support her arguments? Surely anyone considering voting for this Bill must ask the question: why has it not been tabled? If the system has totally failed, then show us. Why would we risk abandoning the autonomy of these boards just because the Minister

has made an unsubstantiated claim? To introduce this type of legislation is drastic action and it must have been provoked by some fairly drastic decisions, yet there is no evidence of this. The only evidence we have is of some backroom deals.

The only people moving for the abolition of the boards and a return to bureaucratic control were those bureaucrats who have a vested interest—those bureaucrats who are motivated not by goodwill toward the community but by some power struggle that perhaps has its genesis in the Labor Party conferences. Not only have the public and the Parliament not seen a copy of this report; the QFRA board also has not seen a copy, despite the fact that it had to finance that report. Yet, surprise, surprise, the Minister has furnished the Queensland fire service union with a copy of that report.

What contempt she has shown for the people of Queensland by depriving this Parliament of such information, yet giving the union hierarchy special access to this report! She has also shown contempt by not allowing the board to have a copy of the report—the board which she now proposes to sack without giving it the opportunity to see those findings. One has to ask why the Minister would continue to denigrate the good name of the board members—and that happened not only in this Parliament but also during the Estimates committee hearings—who I strongly believe worked very hard over a reasonably short period to ensure a well managed delivery of fire and ambulance services. I believe that, in some way, the Minister has relinquished her leadership in this role. I believe that she is a puppet of backroom deals. As I said, she continues to attack the good standing of the board members without being able to substantiate her claims. She could do that quite easily by tabling this Pricewaterhouse-Coopers report.

If it is true, if the Minister honestly believes that the QFRA board has been financially mismanaged, then why does she propose in the Bill to also abolish the Queensland Ambulance Service board? There has been no supposed report into its finances. In the interests of consistency, should the Minister also not have a report to show some alleged financial mismanagement by the QAS board? One would think so, but it has not come to light. She has used selected quotes from her report into the QFRA to also tarnish the Ambulance Service board members. The QAS board members have just as exemplary a record as the QFRA members.

The simple fact of the matter is that the minority Labor Government does not believe for one second that the boards have been badly managed; it simply does not like board structures, which give fire and ambulance services autonomy. That situation does not suit factional deals within the ALP. When the Minister was asked during the Estimates committee to explain why she was also proposing to abandon the Queensland Ambulance Service board, all she could really say was that she felt that the system did not work. She went on then again to quote the PricewaterhouseCoopers report, which had absolutely nothing to do with the QAS. Essentially, the Minister has no reason to abolish the QAS board, either. She is simply trying to hide its abolition behind that of the QFRA board, which she claims to have an excuse for sacking, even though she has not made it public.

In debating this Bill today, we must understand why the coalition Government established the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority Board and why it established the Queensland Ambulance Service Board. We must also understand why the Labor Party supported the creation of these boards in 1996, much to its credit. Now, to its discredit, it chooses to backflip for purely political reasons.

Before the boards were created, there was widespread discontent amongst the fire and ambulance services. For too long the fire and ambulance services had been controlled by bureaucracies removed from the real issues confronting the QFRA and QAS members. Membership was removed from the decision-making process. Indeed, the decision-making process was left entirely within the bureaucracy and was subject to political influence and political interference. The member for Rockhampton in particular knows this well, as he worked as a policy adviser to the Emergency Services Minister in the Goss Government. I think we all remember that very sad situation outside of this very House when the then Minister for Emergency Services, Tom Burns, addressed the QFU members. Not only were the membership of the QFRA and the QAS removed from the decision-making process; so too was the community.

**Mr Schwarten:** I get a right of reply to this.

**Mr MALONE:** Certainly.

**Mr Schwarten:** I'm glad I have to be sitting in here. You have been bucketing me since you've been here.

**Mr MALONE:** If the cap fits, wear it.

**Mr Schwarten:** I know what was said. You weren't there.

**Mr MALONE:** I am quoting Hansard. If the Minister thinks he can cover that, then fine. When the coalition established the boards, it not only put in place an independent structure removed from politicisation, but put in place a structure which ensured that the QFRA and QAS membership, along with community representatives, were involved with the decision-making process.

The boards allow for a totally autonomous structure—an independent structure removed from the factional politics of the AWU and the Centre Left. The Minister now proposes to abolish this autonomy, but she goes further and adds insult to injury by telling this Parliament in her second-reading speech that the Bill will not affect the role of the representative commissioners, firefighters or ambulance officers. This Bill will affect them. It will affect them because it proposes fundamental change that affects the very operations of the Queensland fire and ambulance services. The Independent members must be made very aware that, when they vote on this Bill today, they are voting on whether or not to retain an autonomous structure. They may choose to vote for a return to the days when the bureaucracy ran the service—the very same days that led to firefighters protesting in the streets just outside this Chamber.

This Bill is aimed at stifling community input. It is aimed at stifling the input of service members. When asked why, the Minister espouses some vaguely coherent rhetoric about the boards not working, but she provides no facts and refuses to back her assertions when put on the spot. The Minister's actions are deliberately provocative. They are already undermining the morale of the Queensland fire and ambulance services and they are already setting the groundwork for some interesting industrial relations scenarios. Excuse the pun, but the Minister is playing with fire.

The Minister's arguments that the boards are unelected and unaccountable are weak. She complains that the boards have no part in revenue raising, yet they are able to make decisions on expenditure. To pursue this line of so-called logic, when will all the other boards that fall into this category also be abolished? When will the Minister for Tourism, for instance, be introducing a Bill to do away with the QTTC board? I am sure that he will not be. The Minister for Emergency Services is, I believe, being a little loose with the truth. Certainly I have some huge concerns with regard to the elimination of the boards.

There is one aspect of this Bill that the coalition will support. Not surprisingly, this aspect has nothing to do with the abolition of the boards. There are provisions in this Bill to ensure that pensioners who receive the benefits of a free ambulance service will be able to remain members of local ambulance committees. Currently, a person must be a subscriber to be eligible to be a member of the local ambulance committee. These amendments will allow pensioners who are not subscribers due to the provision of a free ambulance service to remain active members of the LACs. The coalition supports this amendment because, as do the QFRA and QAS boards, we encourage maximum community involvement in the decision-making process.