



Speech by
**Hon. BRIAN
LITTLEPROUD**

MEMBER FOR WESTERN DOWNS

Hansard 29 April 1999

QUEENSLAND FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY AMENDMENT REGULATION (No. 1) 1999
Disallowance of Statutory Instrument

Hon. B. G. LITTLEPROUD (Western Downs—NPA) (11.27 p.m.): In rising to support this motion of disallowance tonight, I must say that it comes as no surprise to me that the motion has been moved. The 14.3% increase in the fire service levy is Labor to a tee. My first experience with a Labor Government anywhere in Australia was Gough Whitlam's Government in 1972. We all saw the reckless ideology of that man and his Government. Since then I have witnessed the Governments of Hawke, Cain, Bannon, Burke, Goss and now Beattie. There are certain things that are characteristic and common to these Labor Governments. They are strong on theory, strong on rhetoric, hopeless in management and public money is no expense. I will repeat those four issues: strong on theory, strong on rhetoric, hopeless in management and public money is no expense.

We are in this House tonight to talk about two things. The first is a rise that is well above the consumer price index. The second concerns integrity. We must remind the people of Queensland that the Premier of Queensland—a very pious man—wrote to the member for Nicklin and gave him an assurance in order to gain Government. The Premier told the people of Queensland on the hustings that there would be no new taxes and no rises. Where is the integrity in that?

I am going to make a prophecy tonight. Public money is no expense. When the election came up some eight or nine months ago the call went out. We were told that there would be a free ambulance service for all senior citizens. We all thought it was a great idea. The people who were going to benefit from that service voted for the Labor Party. However, the catch is still to come. What is Labor going to do now? Is it going to reduce services in order to meet the extra cost? I bet that down the track somewhere there will be a hike in Ambulance Service fees. I put that on the record because it falls into the pattern of being strong on theory, strong on rhetoric, hopeless in management and public money is no expense. Labor believes in getting elected at any expense.

I want to talk about my own personal experiences. In 1995 Tom Burns, the Deputy Premier, was Minister for Emergency Services. The current Minister for Public Works and Minister for Housing, the member for Rockhampton, was Mr Burns' sidekick down here in Brisbane. He was helping to make the place run. I came in as shadow Minister for Emergency Services, having previously been shadow Minister for Corrective Services. I can tell honourable members that it was not long before there was communication between the people in the fire union and myself. They were talking about a lot of unhappiness—unhappiness about their wages, unhappiness about morale and leadership, and they were not getting a very good hearing from the Minister.

The former Minister, Mr Burns, had a reputation of going anywhere in Queensland and charming people off their feet. As the tension grew during 1995-96, the firefighters decided to march on Parliament House. I can still remember the morning, before the bells had rung, when Tommy Burns came up to me and said, "Brian, are you going to go down to the rally?" I said, "I will be down there, Tom." He said, "I am going, too." I could see it in his eyes. He reckoned that he could take on those fellows. He had charmed people all over the backblocks of Queensland, he had charmed them down at Wynnum and he thought that the firefighters would be no trouble. The member for Surfers Paradise came to the rally, too.

Tom insisted on speaking first. He started his normal, pretty forceful sort of attack, and tried to talk a bit of reason to the people. I can tell members that the firefighters were not in that sort of mood. They started to interject on Tom a bit and got under his ribs to the extent that he changed colour in the face and was rather rude to them. I will not mention in the House what was said, but it is sufficient to say that for years people remembered what Tom said to the firemen that day, and their feelings did not subside.

Of course, the firefighters were keen to explain what they were on about. So we gave them an assurance and said that, yes, there had not been a wage rise for a long, long time. There was also a morale problem in the service, probably because of some of the personnel. Of course, by the time the election came around, we had gained their confidence. It was pretty well known that the firefighters were prepared to march and make statements saying that the coalition looked like giving the fire service a much better deal than it ever received under the Goss Government, especially under Tommy Burns.

That brings me to the next issue that I want to raise. A number of times now in this House the Minister for Public Works and Minister for Housing has made an allegation that I did something illegal in my dealings with the Queensland Firefighters Union. He claims that there was a memorandum of understanding co-signed by the Firefighters Union, Rob Borbidge and me. I can tell the members of this House that there was no memorandum of understanding. I can tell them exactly what happened. In common with other members who receive letters from lots of organisations, I received a letter outlining something like eight or nine different issues that the Queensland firefighters wanted me to comment on. So I looked at the coalition's policy and I was able to write back to them stating in general terms what we intended to do about all of those points mentioned in the letter. I signed the letter and Rob Borbidge, the former Premier, signed the letter and we sent it back to the union. There was no co-signing by the Firefighters Union, there was no collusion; it was a matter of straight correspondence to me and we sent a letter back to them. Yet the Minister for Public Works and Minister for Housing has made allegations about this matter. I can tell the honourable members of this House that there is no truth whatsoever to those allegations. I find it offensive that those allegations should be made so many times. So now it is on the record that that is exactly what happened.

The member for Fitzroy referred to the number of appliances that have been commissioned so far during the term of the Beattie Government. I think that the member mentioned 34. Anyone who understands what went on after the change of Government would know that, by and large, the Beattie Government took over the Budget that had been put forward by Premier Borbidge. In fact, on the day that the Budget was brought down, I can recall overhearing the Premier and Deputy Premier, who were walking down the hallway just behind me after the Budget had been produced saying, "That is a pretty good Budget, isn't it?" It was, because the former Minister, the member for Southport, had been successful in negotiating with Cabinet to get some extra money to try to improve things for the Queensland fire service. The reality is that lots of those things are now occurring. It is good to see that. It is all being done with public money. Although these things are occurring during the term of the Beattie Government, credit needs to be given to the member for Southport who, in fact, did wonderful things to try to inject more money into the fire service.

Previously, I heard the Minister interject about the time in the 1980s when Martin Tenni was the Minister. I will admit that, at that time, there was one big mess. A fellow from Tasmania came to Queensland and introduced a system of levies without properly trialling it. We got into a hell of a mess. However, we were big enough to say that it could not work the way it was, and we put aside some funds for that until it was all sorted out. It was a mess, and it took a while to work out. However, I can tell members that the member for Southport was working consistently at getting more money for the fire service to get things on track. Hopefully, the Government will continue on in the same way and we will get things right. However, I ask the Government to please not go to the people of Queensland when an election comes around and make promises that there are going to be no new taxes and no increases in taxes and then come up with something such as this increase of 14.3% in the fire levy.

I notice that lots of small rural fire brigades in my area have benefited to the tune of something like \$8,000 or \$9,000 because they were given water tanks and pumps that can slide onto appliances. These tanks hold 1,500 litres. A lot of the funding for those tanks came from the Gaming Machine Community Benefit Fund, and those rural fire brigades were thankful for that. I think that a lot of those tanks were also given to the fire brigades in the urban/rural interface along the east coast of Queensland. There is a growing demand for fire services in the urban sprawl. People are moving out of urban areas into the forests that surround our cities. That creates one hell of a problem. We have been lucky enough to escape the problems that have occurred in South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales. However, it is to the credit of that Gaming Machine Community Benefit Fund that it has been helping those rural fire brigades. However, it is important to realise that the planning to acquire these big appliances has, in fact, been ongoing for quite some time.

It is also interesting to notice that missing from the speakers list is the former executive officer of the Queensland Firefighters Union, the member for Sunnybank, who also went down to that rally held

by the firefighters in front of Parliament House. He was not very well received by his former members. I thought that he might have liked to speak to this disallowance motion.

I reiterate that I support this disallowance motion put so ably by the member for Mirani against the increase in fees, firstly because they are well above the increases in the CPI; and, secondly, it is a breach of a promise given to the people of Queensland when the election was held and also to the member for Nicklin, who helped Labor form Government.
