



Speech by

GEOFF WILSON

MEMBER FOR FERNY GROVE

Hansard 29 April 1999

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

Mr WILSON (Ferny Grove—ALP) (11.36 p.m.): I rise to strongly oppose this disallowance motion. The people in the Ferny Grove electorate and in the suburbs of the north-west of Brisbane know only too well how valuable the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service is to our safety and to the safety of our loved ones, our homes and other properties. The Samford Rural Fire Brigade is staffed by a large, dedicated contingent of well-qualified volunteers and is well known throughout the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority as being at the leading edge of fire and rescue in a rural setting. There is tremendous community support for the proactive approach of the brigade. The long-established Arana Hills Fire Brigade is staffed by highly regarded professionals who play a vital role in our suburbs. They, too, are very much seen as the community's friend at all times, not just in times of danger or tragedy. These vital local services can be sustained only if the QFRA is kept financially sound and viable, not just now, but in the long term.

On a State level, the QFRA is going through an evolution. It is changing from a service that merely responded to fires to the more proactive organisation that it is today. It is a service that not only fights blazes but also is actively involved in educating the community about fire safety and prevention as well as providing road accident and other rescue services. Every day, our firefighters, be they urban, full-time, part-time or rural volunteers, attend highly dangerous incidents involving not just fires, but gas leaks, chemical spills and toxic fumes. Whatever task they are carrying out, whether it is responding to structural fires or wildfires, rescuing people trapped in blazing buildings or cutting victims from the mangled wrecks of road accidents, firefighters save lives.

In September last year, we saw them called to remove from a Brisbane city building a canister believed to contain the deadly legionella bacteria. In February this year, firefighters from Innisfail and Babinda rescued seven people out of fast-flowing rapids at Josephine Falls. There are countless other stories of rescues carried out by firefighters during the February/March floods that devastated so many Queensland communities. They also pitched in to help in the massive clean-up in the wake of the floods, some of them the worst this century.

Every week in the newspapers around the State there is a litany of good and sometimes heroic deeds performed by firefighters. There are stories of firefighters delivering babies, reviving smoke inhalation victims, cutting motorists out of car wrecks, comforting a young mother whose child has just died in a road accident, and mopping up after severe flooding in many parts of the State. A number of our firefighters are now in New South Wales as part of our Queensland army battling to prevent the spread of the highly virulent Newcastle disease outbreak in the heart of the central coast's poultry industry. Many of those men and women who volunteered their time to help our southern counterparts had bald heads, not because they think that baldness is a fashion statement but because so many of them have taken part in the Leukaemia Foundation's Shave for a Cure event. They helped to raise more than \$1m for bone marrow cancer research. They have been long-time supporters of the burns unit at the Royal Children's Hospital in Brisbane, raising hundreds of thousands of dollars over the years. These men and women do not sit around their stations and wait for a fire, they are out there every day helping their community in an endless number of ways. I heard one firefighter describe his role as that of a guardian angel. I could not agree more.

Mr BEANLAND: I rise to a point of order. Madam Deputy Speaker, I draw your attention to the state of the House.

Quorum formed.

Mr WILSON: That is part of the more proactive approach of the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority. Our firefighters revel in the opportunity to do more for their communities. Over the past decade or so, rescue work has become a major part of a firefighter's job. They are often the first on the scene at road accidents where people may be trapped, and they are now undergoing extensive training in urban search and rescue, trench rescue, high angle rescue, vertical rescue, swift water rescue and confined space rescue.

In addition, they are actively involved in managing chemical spills and hazardous materials. When people watch the evening news and see figures in spacesuits attending chemical incidents, they should know that those people are our firefighters. When one thinks about the highly toxic concoctions that industry uses, one can begin to understand the level of danger that our firefighters are exposed to every day. This Government redirected \$300,000 to front line operations after abolishing the fire and ambulance boards. Around \$36,000 of that was spent on six new chemical suits for stations around the State.

The impact of road accidents on the QFRA has grown significantly in the past few years. Most people would not be aware that firefighters attend more than twice as many road accidents as they did less than five years ago. In 1997-98, fire crews responded to 3,969 rescues. The vast majority of those were road accidents. In comparison, crews responded to 1,899 rescues in the 1993-94 financial year. This financial year, more funds have been committed to purchasing and upgrading road accident rescue gear around the State. The savings made from the abolition of the fire boards took that level of funding even further. Around \$35,000 of the \$300,000 in board savings was spent on additional road accident gear alone.

This Government is well aware that enhanced training, equipment and skills are essential for firefighters to be able to adapt to their ever-changing role. Many people would not know that close to 100 QFRA staff are now recognised as being trained to a high level in urban search and rescue. This training will enable Queensland firefighters to join a national force that can be called on in major emergencies such as the Thredbo landslide and potential bomb explosions such as the one that occurred in Okalahoma a number of years ago. It is also likely that their services will be required for the 2000 Sydney Olympics.

In the last Budget, this Government committed close to \$400,000 to new search and rescue equipment for the fire service. That money was spent on 138 rescue harness and ropes packs, which have been placed on urban fire appliances throughout the State. It is planned to train every permanent firefighter in Queensland to a basic level to use vertical rescue equipment.

We recognised the need to move quickly in providing our firefighters with the necessary skills and tools to deal with major incidents. Only last year we saw how vital this training was when the Opal Centre building in Fortitude Valley collapsed. Our firefighters undertook the search for people trapped on the site. Again that incident highlighted the dangers associated with being a modern-day firefighter.

While firefighters have always carried out rescues, this is the first time that there has been such a focus on training officers. It means that whenever those officers attend an incident of any kind, they will be able to respond efficiently and safely. That will be another string that they can add to their already impressive bow. Firefighters also undergo first-aid training. Lives have been saved because firefighters were able to attend to a sick or injured patient in the absence of an ambulance.

The independent report that was commissioned last year from chartered accountants PricewaterhouseCoopers showed that unless the fire and rescue levy was increased, the QFRA would be insolvent. The alternative to a 27c a week levy increase would be to sack firefighters, close stations and compromise on equipment and training. This Government was not willing to do that. This Government is fully aware of the job that our firefighters do for every member of this Chamber and for every Queenslanders.

Every day some Queenslanders somewhere needs the QFRA, but right now the QFRA needs us. It needs this rescue package to maintain the high level of service that it provides to us. Will we be here for them today so that they can be there for us today, tomorrow, the day after that and the day after that? They are our guardian angels. Without proper Government support for the fire service, every single Queenslanders would be a great deal worse off.

With all members of the Beattie Government, I intend to stand by the brigades throughout Queensland, especially the brigades at Samford and Arana Hills. We can all afford 27c a week. We cannot afford lives and property to be lost unnecessarily.
