



Speech by

Mr G. HEALY

MEMBER FOR TOOWOOMBA NORTH

Hansard 25 August 1999

ROAD TRANSPORT REFORM BILL

Mr HEALY (Toowoomba North—NPA) (2.41 p.m.): In rising to speak to the Road Transport Reform Bill, at the outset I say that it is not before time. I am sure that the Minister recognises that it is not the fault of this Government, nor was it the fault of the previous coalition Government, that this whole process has taken a long and tedious time. I congratulate both Ministers on eventually putting together the legislation which, as a result of discussions over many, many years, will finally see some uniformity in our road laws throughout this nation.

In the time that I have allocated to me, I want to talk about a couple of issues, some of them fairly close to home in my own electorate. One of those issues is the second range crossing. At this point, I thank the Minister for allowing members of his staff and also departmental people to give the member for Toowoomba South, the member for Crows Nest and me a very comprehensive briefing earlier today in relation to that issue.

Mr Bredhauer: I would have been there myself, except I had to be in here.

Mr HEALY: I realise that. Again, I thank the Minister for making those staff members available. I can remember talking about this issue in this Parliament as long ago as 1994. I know that the member for Toowoomba South has spoken quite a fair bit about it, as have other members from the Darling Downs area. We realise the problems facing the department. We realise that there is a Federal Government component in this road as well. The information that we received today at the briefing indicates that there is a level of cooperation between the State and Federal Governments to try to ensure that this project not only goes ahead but also that there may be some chance that at least the initial \$25m that is required for the design and planning of this particular project be forthcoming. It is no secret that this project is a massive road-building project. Without the design process, the figure that has been bandied around of \$250m could, in fact, blow out to somewhere between \$300m and \$350m. We do not know. The ballpark figure of \$250m that was touted some years ago has been the figure that we have been working on. It is a massive project. We have to make sure that the initial allocation of at least that \$25m is forthcoming so that the design and the planning can be completed.

This piece of road is an absolutely vital link between not only western Queensland and Brisbane but also between Melbourne and the port of Brisbane. In recent times, some major and horrific accidents have occurred on the Toowoomba range road. A few months ago, one particular incident had Toowoomba blocked off from the east for up to 12 hours. I can recall the incident very well, because I was returning to Brisbane with the parliamentary Travelsafe Committee. I was at Brisbane Airport and when I got in my car I heard that there had been a major accident on the Toowoomba range. That was at about 4.30 in the afternoon. It had happened much earlier in the day. I thought that by the time I got there the accident would have been cleared. It certainly had not. By the time I got to the Toowoomba range, all traffic was being diverted up some very, very narrow alternative roads that lead up to and around the city. The conditions on those roads were absolutely horrific. Those smaller roads had to carry the level of traffic that normally traverses the Toowoomba range. That included trucks, buses and motor vehicles.

Such accidents are frequent on the range road. We all realise the importance of getting the initial planning stages done for that road. That road carries a huge amount of heavy transport. When an incident such as the one I have mentioned takes place on the range, the range is not only blocked

off from Brisbane but also absolute chaos is caused within the City of Toowoomba. One of the main east-west streets in Toowoomba, James Street, is absolutely clogged. There are eight sets of traffic lights from one end of that street to the other. Not only that, heavy transport is backed up for hours and hours and hours.

The existing range crossing carries more than 13,000 vehicles per day; 2,000 of them heavy trucks. In around 10 to 12 years' time, the number of vehicles using the road is estimated to increase to around 29,000 vehicles a day, with 4,600 of those estimated to be heavy vehicles. That will greatly exceed the carrying capacity of this steep range road.

As I say, the Deputy Director-General of Main Roads, Don Muir, and his staff certainly gave the member for Crows Nest, the member for Toowoomba South and me some hope. We know that they are on side and that they are trying to do as much as they can. A couple of weeks ago in Rockhampton, the members whom I have just mentioned met with the Federal Transport Minister, John Anderson, to discuss with him this issue. I have had meetings with the former Deputy Prime Minister, Tim Fischer, on this matter. In fact, I was able to show the Deputy Prime Minister some fairly graphic and horrific photographs of one of the major incidents that took place on that range several months ago. I think that even he was shocked at just how much carnage can take place.

Mr Mulherin: Did you ask him for some money.

Mr HEALY: I did. I asked him for some more money, as I ask the State Minister for more money all the time—as most members do. However, this matter has to be a combined effort between the State and Federal Governments. I realise that the Toowoomba range crossing has been declared a future national highway in the future national highway project. That is good. That is important. However, the road will continue to be an issue in my area. I am sure that all the Ministers, both Federal and State, are very much aware of the importance of at least getting the detailed planning of this project under way.

In relation to the legislation that we are debating, the Road Transport Reform Bill, in his second-reading speech the Minister outlined the fact—and I also recall the member for Gregory outlining this matter in his very good contribution to this debate—that the national rules will also have a major benefit for the tourism industry in that they will make it easier for tourists to travel around Australia. The difference in the road rules has always been a problem for people travelling interstate. More often than not, people who drive interstate to enjoy themselves at their holiday destinations find themselves in trouble with the law in that State because the road rules are different. It is not really their fault. They are probably not well educated on the road rules of that State before they head to their holiday destination. The differences in each State's road rules also present a problem when international tourists hire a motor vehicle.

Mr Schwarten: They are used to travelling on the wrong side of the road.

Mr HEALY: Some of them are used to travelling on the wrong side of the road. When they come here, without thinking about it, their natural instinct is to head off on the wrong side of the road and they can end up in strife.

Mr Nuttall: It's like some of the racehorses you back; they end up on the wrong side of the road.

Mr HEALY: My record in that regard is a lot better than that of the member for Sandgate. His track record is not all that flash.

In yesterday's debate on the Tourism Legislation Amendment Bill, I took the opportunity to talk briefly about a symposium that was held at Parliament House some months ago. The symposium was organised by CARRSQ from QUT and addressed the issue of tourists and their safety on our roads. Paul Blake represented Queensland Transport at the seminar. It was interesting to hear some of the statistics from the various States in relation to keeping tourists alive on our roads, most of whom are not used to the conditions. They have not been schooled in what it is like on our roads. They think that after a fairly lengthy air flight they can simply get into a motor vehicle and drive from one part of Australia to another. We need to further educate people to ensure that when tourists come to Queensland they are safe on our roads and they know what conditions to expect. With the introduction of national road rules, that will be very important indeed.

I wish to briefly talk about an issue that may or may not have something to do with the national driver licence scheme. I was surprised when I read an article in the Courier-Mail the other day about the percentage of young drivers who fail their driving tests and how much that varies across the State. I was absolutely astounded to see that the State average of drivers declared ready to drive at their first attempt is only 61%. That is down 7% on the 1997-98 figures.

The Courier-Mail article said that learner drivers in Townsville and Stanthorpe are the State's worst. Driving tutors in Townsville had their own theories as to why they had low pass rates. One particular driving school proprietor said that the pressure hit students. He said that students had asthma

and sweating attacks which were brought on because of nervousness, and that is why they tended to fail. Another driving school proprietor in Townsville said that the examiners were too picky and failed people for little things. I was really surprised about the variance across the State of young drivers who fail the first time that they do their driving test. I was also a little concerned when I read that the President of the Australian Driver Trainers Association of Queensland, Peter Tuck, said that there would be more unlicensed drives on the road as a result. I do not know that it will result in more unlicensed drivers on the road. I am a member of the parliamentary Travelsafe Committee and we have just completed our report into unlicensed driving and unregistered vehicles, so I know that it is a concern that the incidence of unlicensed drivers and unregistered vehicles is on the increase. We need to have a good close look at how the new driving tests are faring. New tests have been introduced, but it seems incredible that there is such a difference across-the-board.

Mr Bredhauer: There is a review currently under way.

Mr HEALY: I realise that and I would be interested to see the results of it. Just the other day a constituent of mine came into my office, voicing her concerns about her daughter who is nearly 18 and has been having driving lessons with a driving school. She is about to have her fifth attempt at getting her licence. The driving instructor says that there is no problem with her driving. The problem is that the cost for booking the test is \$29, which is payable every time that the test is undertaken. The other day I was talking to a group of high school students and that was one of the issues that they raised with me. A lot of them had to go for their driving tests three or four times and they have to come up with the money. In many cases, 17-year-olds rely less and less on pocket money from mum and dad. They may have a part-time job at a bakery, Woolies or K mart and they are paying for the tests themselves.

Mr Johnson: My daughter had to take out a bank loan!

Mr HEALY: I would never suggest that the honourable member for Gregory's daughter was a poor driver, but that is an interesting observation. It is a problem. I would hate to think that in some areas it may be regarded as a money making venture for the department. It is of major concern to young people, particularly when the driving instructors—and we have some very good driving instructors throughout the State—cannot explain why these people have to go back three and four times to try to get their licences.

A couple of issues regarding Queensland Rail have come up in my electorate recently, and thankfully we have had a fairly good outcome on them. One relates to Queensland Rail's need to improve train movement efficiencies. I can understand that need, certainly considering the contracts that Queensland Rail has with organisations such as Grainco and the Australian Wheat Board. Huge amounts of grain such as wheat are transported by rail from my area to the port of Brisbane.

In its wisdom or otherwise, Queensland Rail decided that it would initiate something other than the refuelling of diesels at the main Willowburn diesel centre in Toowoomba. Instead, it was to begin operations for mainline train refuelling. The diesel trains would not be uncoupled but would be refuelled on the line with the use of fairly large refuelling trucks. I can see the economics in that and I can see the importance of increased efficiencies as far as train movements are concerned. However, what Queensland Rail did not really identify, perhaps through a lack of consultation, was the fact that residents would be affected not only by the smell of diesel fumes but also by the noise of trains stopping and starting anything up to six or seven times a night at Harlaxton.

I am extremely pleased with the amount of contact that I have had with Queensland Rail, particularly Mr Glen Dawe, who spent quite a bit of time in Toowoomba before he moved to Brisbane to take on a fairly senior position with Queensland Rail. We were able to put a stop to that proposal and Queensland Rail has agreed to look at some alternatives. A lesson that has been well learned in my area is that it does not matter which Government department it is, consultation has to be undertaken and the views of the people have to be taken into consideration. This proposal would have had a dramatic impact on the quality of life of residents who live in an area where other industrial projects are sited, including a quarry. They have been used to the quarry noise and dust for many years so, of course, that particular proposal would not have been the icing on the cake by any means. It would have caused enormous concern. I give credit where credit is due: the Queensland Rail hierarchy has agreed to look again at that proposal, which has certainly eased the minds of a lot of people in that community.

The other day, I received a very comprehensive briefing—and I understand that the Minister did as well—in relation to a study that is being done on upgrading the rail line from Gowrie to Grandchester. This is part of the rail upgrade of a line that came into existence in about 1865. At that time, the range rail crossing was the most significant engineering project anywhere in the world. When we are looking at train movement efficiencies and efficiencies for Queensland Rail, it makes sense to me that we push ahead with those plans. It may still be 10 or 15 years down the track, but it is one of those projects that needs a lot of thought and planning because we need a decent rail corridor between Toowoomba and Brisbane. It amazes me and it amazes some of the people whom I know who come to Toowoomba from Sydney that we do not have an efficient passenger train service between Toowoomba and

Brisbane. That trip normally takes three hours in a train and an hour and half by motor vehicle. I am sure that if anybody could catch a train from Toowoomba to Brisbane that took only an hour and a half, they would patronise it.

I was pleased to receive that briefing the other day, and hopefully things will progress. I told the people involved that whatever study they are doing should include any plans that may be forthcoming from ATEC, Everal Compton's group. As honourable members would be aware, there has been a lot of publicity about the Melbourne to Darwin standard gauge rail line.

Mr Rowell: It is an interesting concept.

Mr HEALY: It is a great concept. It is a visionary plan. I cannot agree with the member for Townsville, who said that it will have dramatic effects on Townsville. This is the sort of project about which we cannot be too parochial, because it will be of benefit to the whole economy and will open up the inland parts of Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. Studies are being undertaken into a new rail line between Toowoomba and Brisbane, and I hope that groups such as ATEC are consulted so that there might be talk of a common corridor or perhaps a dual-gauge line. We have to at least make sure that those people are kept in the loop when discussions take place in relation to that project.

I support the legislation. As I said, it is legislation that I know the former Transport Minister knew a lot about and discussed with many of us on this side of the House. It has been a long time coming but, hopefully, the initiatives in this piece of legislation will make sure that people on our roads, whether they be in heavy vehicles or passenger vehicles, will be able to drive in a safer environment. Certainly, the legislation will afford protection to people on the road from unscrupulous people who tend to do the wrong thing on our roads. I believe the increased penalty provisions within the legislation augur well for those of us who use our road, rail and other transport networks, which are vital to this State.
