



Speech by

HOWARD HOBBS

MEMBER FOR WARREGO

Hansard 2 March 1999

ADDRESS IN REPLY

Mr HOBBS (Warrego—NPA) (4.59 p.m.): I wish to reaffirm my allegiance to Queen Elizabeth II and to His Excellency Governor Arnison. This debate on the motion for the adoption of the Address in Reply gives members of Parliament the opportunity to be able to talk on a wide range of subjects that are important to them and to their electorates and on issues that affect the whole State. I want to cover a number of issues today.

Firstly, some changes have been made recently to the Patient Transit Scheme. We are finding that people who use the Royal Flying Doctor Service in western Queensland are now being denied the service that they previously enjoyed. I hope that the Minister for Health will be able to turn this situation around very, very quickly. The situation is this: previously under the patient travel subsidy scheme, when the flying doctor held a clinic, say, at the mining town of Yowah, which is west of Cunnamulla, anybody who had to be flown from there to, say, a specialist in Toowoomba or Charleville would get the subsidy for the whole trip.

However, now a system has been put in place whereby a person will get the subsidy only for a flight to the hospital closest to the specialist to whom they have been referred. So a person would have to travel the equivalent of 100 kilometres before the subsidy kicks in. The same thing could be said for people who live at Birdsville. They have to fly from Birdsville to Quilpie before the subsidy starts to kick in. So a person will have to travel nearly 600 kilometres before they get any help. Whether that is an anomaly or is deliberate, I am not sure. I certainly believe it is an important issue that needs to be addressed very, very quickly.

Another issue that is very important not just to my area in the west but also to the whole of Queensland is the airconditioning of schools. A lot of the newer members probably would not be aware that, prior to 1989 when the Bjelke-Petersen Government lost office, a scheme was put in place to aircondition schools starting from the west. When we lost Government that scheme was stopped. That line got to about Mitchell down to Bollon. It was slowly being extended to the coast. Nothing really happened for a few more years and then, as we all know, the zone was changed to the north. That is fine; all schools have to be airconditioned.

However, we need to put in place very, very quickly a plan to fix up all those schools. If we keep airconditioning those schools starting from the north, for instance, it will be a very, very slow process and it will be many, many years before some of the schools out in the western region get airconditioning simply because of the huge numbers of schools in the north. I would certainly suggest in very, very strong terms that we also institute a scheme whereby we can aircondition those schools in the west as well. There are not a lot of schools in that region in comparison to the north, and we would cover a lot of ground. We would be able to move very, very quickly and get into the suburbs in a short time.

It is important to realise that out in those western areas the schools need only the evaporative type airconditioning units—they do not need the refrigerative type that is used in the north—so it would be cheaper and I believe we could cover a lot more schools that are presently facing a serious problem. We have seen examples in the past of problems at schools such as Goondiwindi. I believe that it is a good example.

There is a similar need in St George. I am talking to people out there now. They are really concerned. They are at the stage at which they are even talking about protesting. They are people who normally do not protest. We are at a stage at which frustration is running very, very high, and I do not blame them. I am not the sort of person who wishes to encourage people to protest, but there has to

be some recognition that we have had enough. We are going to draw a line in the sand and say, "Enough is enough. We do need to have airconditioning for our kids if we want them to improve." I am sure that the same could be said for most students in those rural and remote areas.

I have another case that I need to talk about, and it relates to school guidance officers. There are four of them in the western region centred on Roma. In the past, two were operating in Roma and two were operating in the Charleville area. However, the Charleville region has been cut back to one. It is just impossible for that one guidance officer to travel from, in this particular case, Tambo in the north to Augathella, Quilpie, Thargomindah, Cunnamulla, Wyandra, Charleville and Morven. That is a huge area.

We have been told by the department that a slight adjustment has been made in the ratio and that we are going to be okay. The simple fact of the matter is that one person just cannot cover that area. At the end of the day, those students out there will once again be denied a guidance officer to help them choose a career. They need some help. They need to be able to be told what is available so that, like anybody else, they can make an informed choice. So I call on the Minister to take some advice on the problems out there. I would like him to move quickly to assist us in this matter.

I want to talk about another very serious issue that relates not so much in my area but to north Queensland. It relates to the air service provided to the Torres Strait and many of the other remote communities in the north. Just recently, a company called Uzu Air was grounded by CASA, the Civil Aviation Safety Authority, because of a so-called breach of safety guidelines. I want to put on the record just exactly what happened up there. The plane that crashed was an Islander flown by a very competent pilot. She had two and a half thousand hours of flying experience. She was a Grade 1 flying instructor, an instructor also in aerobatics and was obviously endorsed in multi-engine operations. The aircraft had no outstanding service warrants at all. Unfortunately, it did crash, resulting in the loss of life.

CASA went up there with a view of, I guess, portraying that it was keeping the skies safe. But the reality is that it has closed down that operation. CASA said that they were not operating legally, that because they were taking paying passengers they were operating an RPT service—a regular public transport service—which was illegal. They had been trying and trying for years to get some resolution to this particular administrative change that was made. In fact, I believe that Uzu Air wrote something like—I cannot think what it was—between four and eight letters to CASA and received only one reply in relation to the issue. Then suddenly they are stopped from flying.

The reason that the Civil Aviation Safety Authority has said that the RPT service should not operate is that the airstrips do not meet the guidelines for an RPT service. They have to be a certain length, a certain width, have a certain glide slope and so on. Unless they lower the sea or raise the islands, those island airstrips will never ever meet those standards. Around the world the situation has been resolved by issuing an air taxi licence. That enables those companies, whether they be a mail service or whatever, to carry people around at a reasonable rate instead of their having to pay the full cost of a charter.

As a result of what has happened, the people in the area have been denied an air service. I have a petition here that has been put together by the residents of Darnley Island. They say—

"The recent action against the air operators by CASA has restricted the operators to conducting strict air charter operations only, placing a ban on air charter operators selling seats or freight space on existing charter flights. This has caused the cost of travel in the Torres Strait to escalate out of reach of most of our people. As CASA's action is not safety related and purely an administrative licensing issue we are therefore asking that the necessary legislation be changed to allow air charter operators to continue servicing the Torres Strait on a share charter basis to allow the frequent and affordable air services that we have enjoyed in the past to continue.

Frequent air travel is imperative to the continuation of all aspects of living in the Torres Strait."

People are putting petitions together. Meanwhile, it just seems to be dragging on. CASA is trying to break this company, like it has broken others, to try to show that it is keeping the skies safe, and it is doing nothing at all of the sort. The infringements it talks about are administrative, are very minor and have no bearing on safety. I call on the Federal and State Ministers for Transport to strongly back a move to get those planes flying again.

Mr Bredhauer: You are about a month too late.

Mr HOBBS: I do not know about that. I think the Minister is the one who is a month too late.

Mr Bredhauer: I spoke to John Anderson two months ago and he has not even given me the courtesy of a reply.

Mr HOBBS: I do not know whether the Minister wrote to John Anderson or not, but I believe we should have had stronger representation from him. He is the local member. I believe we need to hit this

issue hard. We can do it jointly. I think the real enemy here is CASA. I believe it is the real problem. It is not the Minister. I believe we need to get CASA to change its guidelines quickly.

A growing industry in my area is goats. As many people would know, the Charleville abattoir is up and running and going well, but that has led to an increase in the number of people raising goats in the region. The problem we have had is with stealing. The legislation urgently needs to be changed, simply because the goats are classified as feral and therefore under the Act have to be tamed or controlled in some form. People need to know that if they rear or run these goats they need to earmark them or even firebrand on the horn. Legislation urgently needs to be brought into this House to change the terminology from "feral stock" to "stock" so that we do not have any grey areas in relation to whether stock is owned or feral.

Very soon there will be an electoral redistribution. Obviously those large electorates in the west will get bigger. We presently have two Federal members operating in the region from the Gulf of Carpentaria to the New South Wales border and around to Warwick. It is just impossible for those people to give adequate representation, to the level that any person in any other part of the State would expect.

Changes are also taking place in local government. A lot of the rural areas are not represented on councils. This is no reflection on the councillors concerned. I will give an example. In the Murweh Shire there is really only one rural land-holder representative who lives on the land in the shire. There are other examples. In various areas, particularly in the hinterland of the Sunshine Coast, people are saying that they are not getting representation. There is a need to look at that to ensure that when we draw boundaries and put legislation together we take into consideration that everybody should get equal representation. If they do not, eventually the problem will come back and bite.

Another issue I raise is tree clearing. Queensland put in place the first scientifically based tree-clearing guidelines in Australia. I believe that those guidelines were put in place in good spirit, with a lot of cooperation and a lot of work from people around the State. We need to ensure that they are not tightened any more to make it more difficult. In fact, I believe there is room in some cases for slight adjustments.

The other issue is tree clearing on freehold land. It has to be recognised by this Government that people who have bought something, whether it be a licence or whatever, have invested a huge amount of money. Therefore, any Government that comes in and denies the use of a natural resource has to pay compensation. People who lease land pay for the lease, but if they then freehold they pay again. What are they buying? They are actually buying the title and the trees, and they are theirs to use. If somebody comes along and says, "You can't use them", they should be putting their money up.

The same situation applies in relation to water. The water allocation management plans are being developed throughout Queensland at the moment. In many cases, those who have bought licences have bid a lot of money at auction to buy that water. They have put a lot of money into infrastructure—ring tanks, pumps and agricultural equipment. If any change is made, they have to be paid compensation. I make it quite clear to the Government that denying people's licences, by changing the threshold levels for instance, has an impact on those people's livelihoods. The bank manager wants to know about it as well. If the licensee cannot pump water from a certain level, if somebody moves the goal posts, the banks want to know about it. There is a financial impact on them as well.

Race clubs in my area are concerned because of the procrastination of the State Labor Government in relation to the privatisation of the TAB. The funding that was promised to them has not come. They have had to try to work out their dates. They do not know what prize money to allocate. There is a fair bit of confusion. I do not think the Government realises how serious it is. Recently the St George race club had a downpour. It lost about 600 metres of track. Of course, it had to be the finishing post area that was damaged. That race club desperately needs some funds to help put things together. All the uncertainty is making things difficult. I have just sent a memo to the Minister, asking him what he can do. I certainly hope he can help. This is a genuine effort to keep racing going during this uncertain time. There probably will be some other areas that also need help. Racing in those rural areas is very important.

The reduction in the number of electricity authorities from five to one will see a change in the level of representation. The experienced representatives on those boards at the moment will be replaced with advisory boards. The advisory boards are a waste of time. The Government has tried this in the area of health and it did not really work. These bodies have to have some teeth. The Government is putting out people who have an extremely wide range of talents and experience—Councillor Graham Andrews, David Alexander, Bill Copeland, Councillor Daryl McDonald, Councillor Rod Gilmore, Douglas Hartlands and Colin Smith. Those people have a wealth of experience and they are gone. I do not believe we should be allowing that to happen.

Time expired.