



Speech by

Mr J. HEGARTY

MEMBER FOR REDLANDS

Hansard 29 April 1999

QUEENSLAND FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY AMENDMENT REGULATION (No. 1) 1999

Disallowance of Statutory Instrument

Mr HEGARTY (Redlands—NPA) (11.08 p.m.): It is an indictment of this Government that the Opposition has had to move this disallowance motion tonight. It will be an indictment of each and every member opposite—all 45 members opposite—if they fail to support the coalition's motion. It will be an indictment because they will have made a conscious decision to break a key election promise.

It is no secret that Peter Beattie and his Labor Party team went to the State election last year with a commitment to all Queenslanders that taxes and charges would not increase above the inflation rate. They did not give that commitment only once but on numerous occasions in various parts of the State. When they fell one seat short of being able to form a Government, in a desperate effort to receive his support Mr Beattie reiterated that commitment in a letter to the member for Nicklin. Ten months have now passed and the Beattie Labor Government is just itching to break its promise.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! This is actually repetition. I heard this speech from the previous Opposition speaker. Is this speech a copy?

Mr HEGARTY: No, Mr Speaker. We are of like mind. This is a very important issue. This is original intellectual property.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! It really is yours? I will let the member continue.

Mr HEGARTY: The Opposition has come forward with this motion tonight to ensure that the credibility of Parliament and of all its members remains intact.

Mr Speaker, you can imagine how much of a shock it was to all Queenslanders when they awoke several weeks ago to hear the announcement that the urban fire levy was to increase by 14%. They were not only shocked by the price increase, they were not only shocked by the broken promise but they were also shocked by the sheer magnitude of the dishonesty being peddled by those members opposite.

The State coalition is adamant that there is no need for a 14% increase in the fire levy, just as we are adamant that there is no need for the Beattie Government to introduce a hike in butchers' fees by up to 300%, or a further \$40 rise in the compulsory third-party premiums. We are equally adamant that the Beattie Labor Government must be made to adhere to the commitments it gave all Queenslanders, just as we are adamant that the member for Nicklin must also adhere to the document he signed with Mr Beattie last year. The member for Nicklin signed a contract with Mr Beattie that went far beyond relating just to the people of Nicklin. That contract related to the people of Queensland. And tonight the member for Nicklin will be given the opportunity to decide whether he will honour the signature he inscribed or whether he will join the Premier by leaving a dark stain of dishonesty and deceit right across the pages of Hansard.

When the previous Borbidge Government left office, we also left in place a trust fund for the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority which had a surplus of \$18m. And when we left office, we also left an economy and a Treasury which were the envy of every other State. But in the 10 months since Labor took office, that economy and that Treasury have obviously deteriorated significantly.

Several weeks ago, the Minister for Emergency Services made the announcement that all householders in Queensland were to cop a major hike in their fire levies. When the Minister made that announcement, she kept a straight face and said that the increase was necessary because the QFRA

trust fund would be facing a debt of over \$100m. The Minister claimed that the debt had been identified in a report commissioned from PricewaterhouseCoopers which had been completed last year. Indeed, it had been completed before Mr Beattie and the Treasurer had handed down their first Budget. So if the report showed that an increase in the fire levy was necessary, why did the increase not appear in the State Budget when it was handed down last September? Or was the Minister being just a little bit too loose with the truth when she claimed that the increase was necessary as a result of this so-called independent inquiry into the QFRA?

Equally, the Minister needs to explain why the people of Mulgrave were not told about the pending increase in the fire levy. After all, the so-called independent report, as the Minister herself claims, was completed well before the Mulgrave by-election was held. The Minister needs to further explain why she sat on the report and refused to release its contents for nearly nine months. The Minister needs to explain why she refused to provide the Opposition with a copy of the so-called independent report. She also needs to explain why she refused a request from the Estimates committee to receive a copy of the report. After all, the Estimates committee made it very clear that it wanted a copy of the report to ensure that the State Budget allocations for the Fire and Rescue Authority were indeed suitable.

It is very obvious why the Minister never released the report. She never released the report because it did not back her claim that an increase in the fire levy was necessary. The increase in the fire levy has nothing to do with some imaginary debt in the QFRA's finances. Even the Beattie Government's own Budget papers confirm that the trust fund had an \$18m surplus. Instead, the Minister's decision to increase the fire levy is a direct result of the Beattie Government's failure to provide enough finances in its 1998-99 Budget to maintain an adequate fire service. This increase is nothing more than a money grab aimed at trying to get the Government off the hook for taking responsibility for funding the Fire and Rescue Authority.

It is important to note that the 14% hike in the fire levy impacts not just on households; it also impacts on every commercial operation, every voluntary club, every private school and child-care centre and every hospital in Queensland. There is no end to the lengths to which this Government will go to scrape together a few extra dollars in direct contradiction of a commitment it gave to all Queenslanders.

The actions of the Labor Party tonight are the very actions that have damaged the reputation of mainstream politics. On the one hand we have Mr Beattie claiming he wants to rid Queensland of the One Nation influence and that he wants to rid Queensland of the cynicism in which many people hold politicians, yet it is these very actions—these actions of blatant dishonesty—that in fact fan the flames of discontent. It is these actions—a blatant contradiction—which foster resentment of our political process. It is Mr Beattie and his 45 members sitting opposite who give so many Queenslanders yet another reason to be disenchanted with the political system.

And even though the coalition wants no bar of this rampant dishonesty, the fact remains that all politicians—politicians as a whole—get tarnished by these actions which Mr Beattie insists must be carried through. Well, there is an opportunity tonight to put a stop to that dishonesty. There is an opportunity tonight for all 45 members opposite to put the fundamental principle of honesty ahead of party politics, and there is an opportunity for them to put their fundamental commitment to their electorates ahead of party politics. As a Parliament, we must oppose the rise in the fire levy. We have it in our power to do so. It is simply a matter of whether or not the members of the Labor Party have the will to do so.

The Minister has made claims in various newspapers that the failure to raise the fire levy tonight will result in the Government having to downgrade fire services. That claim is a monumental indictment on the Minister's management of her portfolio and raises the question: why can Labor not afford to keep the fire services operational at existing levels without increasing the fee when the previous coalition Government was able to do so? And if the member for Nicklin is adamant that he believes the Minister's claim that the QFRA was facing a debt, then he must also explain: why did he refuse a full Treasury costing of the coalition's policies and the Labor Party's policies when he was offered that opportunity by then Premier Rob Borbidge?

It is as clear as day that this Government has engaged in a monumental deceit, and it is as clear as day that it is about to endorse a complete backflip on a key election promise. All members have a duty tonight to oppose that backflip by supporting this disallowance motion if there is to be any credibility left in this Queensland House of Assembly.