



Speech by

Mr M. ROWELL

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

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ROAD TRANSPORT REFORM BILL

Mr ROWELL (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (3.31 p.m.): This Bill is quite important. A lot of the work was done initially by the member for Gregory when he was Transport Minister. It is good that the current Government has seen fit to introduce many of these measures that are important to the heavy vehicle transport industry.

I would like to speak in particular about the northern area of this State and the sugar roads, which are one of the major concerns in north Queensland. I am sure that the Minister—coming from that part of the State—would be very much aware of the need for good road construction, particularly because many heavy vehicles use the roads in that part of the State at various times of the year.

One of the major problems facing heavy transport is the wet weather in that area. Heavy transport certainly can be very detrimental to the condition of our road system. Over the past couple of years, and particularly last year, we have experienced really extraordinary wet weather the likes of which we have not seen for some time.

Mr Bredhauer: Just like the old days.

Mr ROWELL: We got a bit more than we have in past wet seasons. From August last year the weather was extremely unseasonal. For a period of about eight or nine months there was an absolute saturation of that road system. Some of the road construction that was done in that area 15 and 20 years ago was inferior to the roads that are being constructed these days. As a consequence, many of those roads broke up under heavy transport. I have to say that the Federal Government bears a high level of responsibility for that. I have been on its back to make sure that we get adequate road funding. It is quite important that we do not have to continually patch up those roads, and that is effectively what has happened over the years; it has been a patch-up job. Of course, the State is also involved in making sure that our roads are in good condition, but sometimes we are not rewarded as well as we should be.

I would like to return to the subject of the roads over which sugar is transported. Expansions in the sugar industry are occurring throughout the north of the State, and in my electorate in particular a lot of sugarcane is being transported by road. In fact, in the near future there will be a truck going past one particular point on the highway every 10 minutes. Because sugarmills are looking for additional areas into which to expand, there will be an enormous amount of traffic on the highway. State-controlled roads are very much part of that.

Many of our roads are not up to the standard required for B-doubles, and we have had to do something about that. When the member for Gregory was the Minister for Transport, he visited the Warrami area, which is just south of Tully. We went through an implementation process, with a consultant doing work on what was required. We looked at a range of options for those roads, including whether we could get the cane off the roads, particularly the main highway, and develop some sort of rail feeder system. The consultant looked at that process. But unfortunately, at the end of the day, the best short-term solution was to use semitrailers and B-double-type transport to get the cane to mills some 80 or 90 kilometres away. As a consequence, the roads got knocked around extremely badly. Intermingling B-doubles with school transport vehicles can be extremely dangerous, so it was important to develop a strategy for the future to enable us to provide some form of support for the councils. We

certainly looked at the transport system in general with a view to taking cane transport off those roads, particularly the highway, and getting it onto some form of light rail or even Government rail. But unfortunately, Government rail proved to be unsatisfactory and, as I said, we had no alternative but to transport cane on the highway.

As the Minister would be aware, the tablelands are facing a similar situation. One mill in that area is wanting to expand in order to maintain its viability. It is a very good area for sugarcane growing. The mill is in the first process of crushing cane, and it is using the rail system—rather than road—to take the cane down the Kuranda Range to be processed at the Babinda mill and in Gordonvale. There are some advantages in using rail for that type of transport and eliminating trucks from our roads.

I also wish to mention the horticultural industry, which is very important to north Queensland. Bananas are worth probably \$200m annually—sometimes more. Producers of bananas, pawpaws, mangoes and other fruit are very dependent on a good road system to get their product to market in a good state. That is one of their main criteria. They do not want to transport their produce over roads that break up; they need smooth roads, otherwise their fruit gets bruised and damaged and, as a consequence, the value of their product is diminished.

Many shires face major problems because of their bad economic circumstances. I mention in particular the Johnstone Shire, which is in the northern end of my electorate. The local government there cannot afford to maintain good bitumen roads. In some cases, it is being forced to tear up a bitumen road and return it to dirt. That is quite disastrous for that shire because of the level of rainfall that it receives.

There are also major problems associated with some 40-odd wooden bridges that were built many years ago—probably as long as 40 or 50 years ago. Because of an abundance of timber in the area at that time, a wooden bridge could be built at a fairly low cost. But those bridges cannot handle the weights that are now going over them. Often, if low-loader carrying a cane harvester has to cross one of those bridges, people are forced to off-load the cane harvester, let the low-loader go across, walk the cane harvester over the bridge and then reload it. So in some of those areas we are going back to Third World country status in some respects.

Another very important element of good roads and road transport is the fact that tourism is one of the major growth industries in north Queensland. I think the Minister would agree that north Queensland has a lot to offer. Enormous numbers of people travel to the north of the State during the winter. In fact, this year there seemed to be a mass exodus from the south because of cool weather down there. We find large groups of people travelling at low speeds—perhaps 70 km/h or 80 km/h—and causing difficulties. Inevitably we will have to look at installing passing lanes in certain areas otherwise the safety of people travelling on the highway will be at risk.

We also need better signage in certain areas. People who do not know the area need to know where they are going. We need sufficient signage to support the tourist industry. People who are looking around and who do not understand where they are going can cause a hazardous situation. They do not know whether to turn to the left or right and they are probably not taking sufficient notice of road conditions. The Minister might laugh at what I am saying, but I can assure him that it is a serious situation. People can be forced into doing things which they would not necessarily do under normal conditions.

I would like to refer to machinery inspectors. In north Queensland we have quite a lot of heavy machinery. On quite a few occasions I have written to the Minister regarding the necessity to address this situation. The machinery inspector for most of my electorate resides in and operates out of Innisfail. Appointments are made on a needs basis for the most part. People are required to ring the machinery inspector and make appointments, but it can take six weeks before an inspection can be effected. The machinery inspector visits Tully and Ingham, where he has facilities for carrying out inspections.

From time to time people find that they have defects in their vehicles and have to have them repaired by the competent operators whom we have in the area. The vehicle then has to be re-inspected. Previously, motorists had two months' grace in relation to their registration where machinery inspections were concerned. That is no longer the case. It is not always possible to gain the certificate in time to coincide with registration. That necessitates the owner undertaking costly re-registration of the vehicle. In some instances, people find that their vehicles are kept off the road for some time. People find that they have to wait three weeks to see the inspector and then have to keep the vehicle off the road for a further three weeks.

We are not well served with machinery inspectors. In one letter I wrote to the Minister I referred to the possibility of having local people acting as authorised inspectors who could undertake the second inspection. I believe this option is needed because we are keeping vehicles off the road. That can be detrimental to everyone concerned.

When the shaker used to go through the area we had 80 or 90 vehicles that had to be inspected. It took time to go through that process. He also had to carry out his normal work involving heavy vehicles. It was a long process and affected a lot of operators.

I would like to refer to drivers licence examiners. The member for Toowoomba North referred to young people who go to the licensing examiners for their first test. Very often they return several times. There are always people in the community who believe that is simply a money-making exercise for the Department of Transport. I do not believe that that is the case. Young people must have a certificate of competency which allows them to drive motor vehicles. I have no problem with that. However, sometimes nit-picking occurs. For the most part, examiners come to my area from Townsville or Cairns. It takes the examiners some time to get to Ingham in order to carry out the examinations.

I have spoken to Bob Barton about this matter and I believe it would be beneficial if we had an examiner located in a more central area to undertake this work. If the examiner had time on his hands he could go to Townsville or Cairns and give some assistance in those areas. Sometimes people have to wait five or six weeks to undertake a driving test. People working on the cane haul-out who require a UD licence have had to wait. For the most part, these problems have been resolved, but it has been a process which has caused some angst. I believe a lot of the problems could be solved if we had an examiner stationed in a more central location.

One other matter I would like to mention concerns the Department of Transport's call centre. Many people have called me and complained about the service. I have also written to the Minister about the situation. The Minister has told us that there has been a large build-up in the numbers of people using the service and, as a consequence, there are extensive delays. I am told that sometimes the delays can extend to 40 minutes. My secretary has tried to get through and it has taken her up to 23 minutes to be successful. I do not know what the Minister can do about it.

People ring the number and have to wait for 30 or 40 minutes and, as a result, they become very uptight about the situation. The first thing they do when they get through to the number is spend a few minutes venting their spleen on the person who responds. That is not necessary, but it is the result of frustration. We have to find some mechanism whereby we can overcome this situation. The Minister must see what he can do to improve the situation.

Many people want to contact the department to arrange such things as vehicle inspections. Members of Parliament are not the only people who use the call service. People in business cannot afford to spend 20, 30 or even 40 minutes waiting on the phone for someone to respond. They have to conduct their businesses. They are not aware of the problems the department has as a result of the build-up in the number of calls. People do not want to spend their time in the fruitless pursuit of information. If one has work to do, one cannot sit there holding the telephone for a lengthy period of time.

I would like the Minister to take that matter on board because it is a serious situation. The previous Minister, the member for Gregory, installed a call centre at Emerald. Is that right?

Mr Johnson: Yes, at Emerald.

Mr ROWELL: It seems that that process has now been exhausted. Maybe we have to get back to involving local people within the department. Perhaps there has to be some cross-pollination. We do not want to waste the time of people in the department but we also do not want the public to be frustrated when they are trying to get through to the department.

I want to make some mention of local government. Local government plays a large part in providing roads. Local government has its role to play in safety issues. This is a group that works very hard with a minimal amount of finance. Local government does what it can in terms of providing good facilities and roads for trucks and passenger vehicles.

We have been through processes where they have contracted out work. I know that the previous Minister did a lot of work with the western councils to enable them to be able to get work on a contract basis. For the most part, that has worked particularly well. The department has still maintained a work force and a competitive spirit has been adopted in regard to much of the work that has been done. My summation of the process is that it has gone quite well. I really hope that it continues, because we cannot have western areas and northern areas losing out to contractors with better equipment who come in from the more populated areas to do the work. In some areas there is a need for that to occur, but as far as possible we have got to keep the jobs, jobs, jobs local. I think that the previous Minister did a lot of work to ensure exactly that.

Finally, I would like to speak briefly about Mourilyan Harbour, which is very important to transport in north Queensland. Pivot was very interested in using the harbour to bring in ships carrying fertiliser. The harbour could become a major distribution point. I know that \$5m was required for the dredging of Mourilyan Harbour. We are working through that process. We need ports such as Mourilyan to relieve the burden from heavy transport, particularly rail and road, and so that we can have access to overseas destinations for the importation of fertiliser and so on into north Queensland.