



Speech by

Hon. MERRI ROSE

MEMBER FOR CURRUMBIN

Hansard 4 March 1999

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Ambulance Service

Hon. M. ROSE (Currumbin—ALP) (Minister for Emergency Services) (10.05 a.m.), by leave: The Opposition has sought to create concern within communities the length and breadth of this State by suggesting the Ambulance Service is incapable of adequately servicing Queensland. The claims by the member for Mirani are an insult to every ambulance officer in Queensland. Queensland ambulance officers are proud people—proud of the level of service they provide to their local communities. Yet the honourable member misrepresented the service, suggesting there were dozens of understaffed ambulance stations. The so-called crisis threatened the successful implementation of the Government's free ambulance scheme, he trumpeted. There was not the basic manpower to ensure a basic service, he said. I can assure the House that implementation of the free ambulance scheme from 1 January has been smooth. Up to 850,000 Queenslanders are the direct beneficiaries of this great Labor initiative.

The QAS offers much, much more than a basic service to Queenslanders. Our ambulance officers are highly dedicated, highly trained and highly motivated. The honourable member's outburst highlighted his appalling ignorance of how the QAS works. What he did was attempt to whip up concern within communities to suggest there might be no ambulance officer at the door in times of need, no transport for hospital treatment and no pre-hospital care. But he was exposed: exposed by the QAS, by incensed officers in charge of stations and members of local ambulance committees. They came out fighting—fighting to restore the good name of their officers. Senior ambulance managers dismissed the claims as outrageous. They knew the truth.

The vast majority of vacancies referred to by the honourable member as proof that so many stations were understaffed were technical vacancies. For the benefit of the honourable member, I state that that means they were positions to which permanent appointments had not at the time been made. It did not mean stations were understaffed. Most positions were filled by temporary or acting staff. The member could easily have discovered that staffing in the North Coast Region, where he claimed almost half the stations were undermanned, was the best it has been for years, and that there were just four net vacancies across the heavily populated Greater Brisbane and South Eastern regions. In his own Central Region, he would have bought an argument with the QAS regional executive director with the outrageous suggestion that almost one third of stations were understaffed. It would have been the same story in the far north, and he would have found out that the Northern Region vacancy rate was improving.

The facts are these: since coming to Government we have employed an additional 65 ambulance officers; the net vacancy rate across all regions was about 5.6% to establishment as at 30 November compared with 9.8% when Labor came to Government; we have boosted the Ambulance Service budget to a record \$178m—more than \$19m above the last coalition budget; and additional funding will continue in coming years. The Government will continue to recruit ambulance officers to train officers to higher levels of competence. Twenty-three students started in January and another 36 are due in a further two intakes this month.

The difficulty in attracting staff to remote areas is not new and is not unique to the Queensland Ambulance Service. I am determined to address this problem. Already the Government has enhanced the Remote Area Incentive Scheme and other options are now being considered. The QAS is conducting a strategic staffing review and a working party has been formed to consider the best ways to overcome a problem which has plagued some remote communities for several years.

These are further positive steps by a Government that has done more for the Ambulance Service than was done in more than two years by members opposite. We have boosted funding, hired more staff and given the Ambulance Service much-needed stability, and it is paying dividends.

The Opposition must now desist from trying to frighten Queensland communities. I urge members opposite to display some intellectual honesty by admitting the improvement in ambulance service and morale under this Government.

Mr Johnson interjected.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! I say to the member for Crows Nest that that remark was unparliamentary.

Mr JOHNSON: That was me, Mr Speaker.

Mr SPEAKER: That was unparliamentary and I ask the member to apologise and withdraw.

Mr JOHNSON: I apologise to the Minister and I withdraw.
