



Speech by

Hon. MERRI ROSE

MEMBER FOR CURRUMBIN

Hansard 29 April 1999

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

Disallowance of Statutory Instrument

Hon. M. ROSE (Currumbin—ALP) (Minister for Emergency Services) (11.45 p.m.): This disallowance motion shows the absolute contempt that members opposite have for the safety of Queenslanders. I place on the record the fact that the shadow Minister who moved this disallowance motion is not in the Chamber at this time and certainly was not in the Chamber during the last speech.

Members opposite are playing Russian roulette. They are gambling with the lives of Queenslanders. The cheap political stunt that they are playing here tonight is going to backfire on them. It will blow up in their faces. I want Queenslanders to be left in no doubt whatsoever that Opposition members—every single one of them—are willing to compromise the safety of their fellow Queenslanders. That is exactly what a vote for this ridiculous disallowance motion means.

This motion has been brought by those opposite to cover their own incompetence and hypocrisy. They do not seem to understand simple economics. They have implied that the \$18m that was left in the bank after they were kicked out of office was going to be sufficient to run a \$200m organisation. They were, and still are, poor economic managers. The purchase of industrial harmony by employing 135 firefighters was bought on credit card—buy now and pay later. What was their plan to enable them to pay later? They did not have one! The economic genius from Southport, with the active complicity of the member for Caloundra, simply did not have a plan. The former Treasurer has told us as much. They just ran bills up on the slate. I wonder how they were going to get Treasury to wipe the slate clean for their petulant promises.

Now members opposite would have this House reject a move by the Government to ensure the safety of Queenslanders living in communities right across the State. The Opposition wants to jeopardise the safety of our firefighters—urban permanents and part-time and rural volunteers; the 50,000 people who collectively protect life and property.

This motion is a scandalous abuse of the Westminster system. Every single member in this House should support what the Government is doing to ensure the financial security of our fire service. It is no secret that the Government inherited an appalling legacy from the coalition. I have said it before and I will say it again: the QFRA was a financial basket case when we came to Government. If the QFRA was a private company, it would have been insolvent. Shareholders would have voted out the board—the Opposition Leader, the former Treasurer and the former Minister, the member for Southport. Luckily, the shareholders—the people of Queensland—did exactly that. It was left to us to repair the damage and we accepted the challenge that those opposite refused.

Just two nights ago I took great pleasure in informing the House that we had turned around the disastrous mess that was the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority under the coalition. On Tuesday evening I found it incredible that members opposite would even put their heads up on this issue, considering their appalling record. I gave them a guarantee that every time they put their heads up, we will lop them off. Come in spinner! Here they are again; they are gluttons for punishment.

Three separate reviews of the fire service highlighted the need for action. Two of those reviews were undertaken when the coalition was in Government. Those reports all said that the fire service needed additional funding or it would go broke. Staib, Masters, PricewaterhouseCoopers: it is there in black and white for all to see.

I am amazed that the coalition continues to pursue this matter when it has been shown so clearly to be negligent in its responsibility to the fire service during its term in Government. Its irresponsibility extends back to the beginning of its short-lived term. The Staib report, which it commissioned, reported in 1996 that additional funding was needed to address the ageing vehicle fleet, refurbish buildings and provide better equipment. It stated—

"Funding must therefore be addressed as a critical priority for the future."

How much attention did it pay to its own report? Virtually none! Throughout the term of Government of members opposite, the situation deteriorated, with unfunded initiatives piling up—enterprise agreements, restructuring and new head office positions—all without any regard for the financial health of the fire service. It was completely irresponsible.

In 1997 we had the Masters report—a report which rang alarm bells yet again. That report was kept secret until we tabled it in the House for all Queenslanders to see. Members opposite were warned as early as April 1997 that the QFRA trust fund was heading into the red, according to consultant Paul Masters, by the end of the 1999 financial year. Just to refresh the memories of those opposite, I will quote from Masters. He stated—

"Budget predictions indicate the QFRA will be in a deficit financial situation by the end of the 1999 financial year."

Again, he stated—

"... urgent action will need to be taken to correct the deteriorating situation."

"Urgent action"! He stated further—

"Whatever options are adopted, it is essential urgent action be taken to stop the deteriorating financial position."

Members opposite cannot hide from the truth. The shocking truth is that they did absolutely nothing. What is it about the word "urgent" that they do not understand?

In relation to the coalition's actions during its term in Government, the report states—

"All of the actions have again begun to drain the resources of the state fire services trust fund through which QFRA operates."

Yet the Leader of the Opposition, with his hand on his heart, states that the QFRA was financially healthy when they left Government. It was not. No way! It was headed towards bankruptcy and insolvency. The former Government was going to have to close fire station doors and sack firefighters.

One of the first things that I did when I became Minister was commission an independent financial audit of the QFRA trust fund. Respected auditors PricewaterhouseCoopers discovered a financial crisis which would have plunged the authority into debt by next financial year. The review revealed some staggering and shameful facts. High among them was that the former Minister and former Government were acutely aware of the problem. When it comes to credibility, I would rather accept the word of a respected auditing firm such as PricewaterhouseCoopers than that of those opposite. I am confident that the rest of Queensland feels the same.

Just to refresh the memory of members opposite—and I know this will make them squirm in embarrassment—I will now quote from the PricewaterhouseCoopers report. It stated—

"A continuation of the QFRA's operations on the current basis will lead to reduced effectiveness and insolvency."

Insolvency! Our fire service was going broke. The report told us that if we did not do something now our fire brigades and firefighters would not have been able to protect our communities to the standard that Queenslanders have a right to expect. What else did the report indicate? It stated—

"There is little evidence to suggest that action has been taken to rectify the major financial issues. Political issues have stalled action that should have been taken by the board ... the capital of the organisation is being eroded as funds are used for recurrent expenditure."

It was a litany of economic and political mismanagement. Members opposite mortgaged the financial future and viability of the fire service.

With their unfunded 1995 election promises in respect of additional firefighters, with their refusal to make adequate provision to fund the enterprise agreement, with their refusal to fund the recommendations of the Staib review, which the QFRA board implemented without worrying where the money was coming from, the coalition demonstrated a breathtaking level of financial irresponsibility.

Mr Malone interjected.

Mrs ROSE: I note the comment by the shadow Minister that he had not had a briefing on the PricewaterhouseCoopers report. So that the facts are on the record, I point out that my office was contacted by the Leader of the Opposition's office requesting a copy of the report for the Leader of the

Opposition. This was after the announcement. I said that I was more than happy not only to provide him with a copy of the report but also to organise for officers of my department to give him a briefing on it. As it turns out, he was ill and the Leader of the Liberal Party attended the briefing in his place. The shadow Minister will have to take up with the Leader of the Liberal Party why he did not tell the shadow Minister about the briefing or invite him to participate. The shadow Minister should ask the Leader of the Liberal Party.

Mr Schwarten: The speech of his tonight will be given to every fire officer in Queensland.

Mrs ROSE: I will save the shadow Minister the trouble of making sure that a copy of his speech goes to every fire station throughout the State. We might also distribute a copy of the speech of the member for Western Downs, because he admitted that the fire service was one big mess under the National Party. I thank him for his honesty.

Our rescue package will help to protect communities across the State. It will also ensure the future financial security of our fire service. As my colleague the member for Archerfield noted, the proposed 27c a week increase in the fire and community safety levy is a small price to pay for peace of mind. That is less than the cost of a local phone call or a postage stamp. But how much is a life worth? Very little, if we consider what the Opposition is trying to do here tonight! That levy increase will allow a \$25.5m annual injection of additional funds into the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority. Every cent will go into improving fire services to Queensland communities. Every firefighter and everyone else in the community will know that members opposite oppose that injection of \$25.5m into the QFRA.

The alternative to the minor increase was to sack firefighters, close fire stations and compromise on equipment and training. That is what members opposite proposed—to do nothing and compromise people's safety. We will not be a party to that unpalatable scenario. Queenslanders' lives are worth more than that to us. We will not compromise the safety of Queenslanders. This package will ensure that an improved standard of fire protection is delivered and that the QFRA is properly funded into the 21st century.

The House has heard how the additional funding, on top of the record budget afforded to the fire service by this Government, will allow the QFRA to expand fire safety, education and prevention programs. It will be able to focus on the full range of rescue services, from road accident to building collapse and swift water rescues, as well as responding to chemical spills and incidents involving toxic materials. The funding boost will allow the QFRA to significantly boost its ability to protect communities in respect of fires, rescues and other emergencies.

The winners out of all of this are Queenslanders. The levy increase is transparent, and even the blinkered members opposite can see where the money is going—back into our fire services, back into protecting firefighters and Queenslanders in communities across the State. Even before tonight the Opposition showed its true colours. It showed people just how low it will stoop to cover up its embarrassment. It has peddled untruths and innuendo right throughout the length and breadth of the State. The Leader of the Opposition and the member for Mirani are the chief culprits. They cannot be trusted. They have proven that before and they are proving it again tonight.

Members opposite seek to make a big deal out of not being able to see the PricewaterhouseCoopers report. There was absolutely nothing sinister about that. Unlike those opposite, I was determined to resolve the problem. The PricewaterhouseCoopers report contained a range of funding options, and I did not trust the Opposition not to distort the situation and play political games, and my mistrust was well founded. Its sheer hypocrisy was revealed by the fact that, when I offered to brief the Opposition on the report, as I said before, it was so disinterested that only the member for Moggill turned up. As I said, the member for Mirani was very conspicuous by his absence. The Opposition is willing to compromise on safety; it is willing to use Queenslanders as pawns in its petty political games. How it can sit here tonight and expect the rest of this Parliament to be duped into supporting its motion is beyond comprehension.

This Government has put the fire service on a secure financial footing. We have been up front from the start; we made the tough decision; we did the responsible thing; and we resolved the funding issue. We did what those opposite—if they had the best interests of Queenslanders at heart—should have done, and they all know it. The facts are these: it will cost \$209m to run the QFRA this financial year—\$209m to provide the standard of fire cover and fire education that Queenslanders deserve. Next year it will cost another \$25m if we are to maintain or improve the service delivery, if we are to accelerate the replacement of the ageing QFRA fleet, if we are to train our firefighters—full-time, part-time and rural volunteers—to high levels, if we are to provide protective clothing for and safeguard the 50,000 firefighters who protect lives and property across the State, if we are to properly equip our firefighters, if firefighters are to continue to enhance their fire education and fire safety programs, and if they are to reach out to teenagers on the verge of taking to the roads to explain the need for caution behind the wheel.

Queenslanders deserve this. A vote for this motion tonight is a vote to rob them of this right. It is a vote to downgrade our fire service, to downgrade fire protection, and to increase the inherent risks of

fire. The truth is that the coalition's idea of funding for the 38-hour week was, in the 1998-99 year, to approve \$4.842m for the implementation of the 38-hour week for firefighters. Its own Forward Estimates document revealed that funding was "regarded as temporary" and needed to be recovered in 1999-2000. That means that it was a loan—and that loan was repayable by the QFRA. No provision was made for funding in the out years, being 2000-01 and 2001-02. Do honourable members know how much money the Opposition allocated for the 135 additional firefighters? \$250,000 for 135 firefighters!

An Opposition member interjected.

Mrs ROSE: I have a copy of the Budget documents. Does the member opposite want to see the Budget documents? Here it is— 1996-97, \$250,000. There was no allocation in the following years. Where was the money going to come from?

Mr BORBIDGE: I rise to a point of order. I draw the Minister's attention to the last Budget of the coalition Government, which budgeted that expenditure.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Dr Clark): Order! There is no point of order.

Mrs ROSE: I am happy to table the documents. Even if honourable members believe the spurious claims of the Opposition spokesperson that these initiatives were funded, where was the money going to come from? Once again it was to come from eating into capital outlays, something that is clear from the coalition's own Budget documents, which show that total capital outlays were to decrease by \$4.4m between 1997-98 and 1998-99. Any member on the opposite side of the Chamber who votes for this disallowance motion is voting against the safety of Queenslanders and is voting against—

Mr Littleproud: We're voting on principle; you're telling lies.

Mrs ROSE: So the member opposite objects to an additional \$25.5m injection into the fire service.

Mr Littleproud: I'm objecting to people not keeping a promise.

Mrs ROSE: The member objects. That is what we will make sure that the Queensland community knows—

Mr LITTLEPROUD: I rise to a point of order. The Minister is being mischievous. I will put it on the record that I am objecting to a Government that does not keep its promise.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! There is no point of order.

Time expired.
