



Speech by

Mr N. ROBERTS

MEMBER FOR NUDGE

Hansard 2 December 1999

PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE

Backflow Prevention Programs

Mr ROBERTS (Nudgee—ALP) (10.18 a.m.): I move—

"That this House take note of Public Works Committee report No. 61 on public sector backflow prevention programs."

Last financial year in Queensland there were 65 deaths and 1,698 serious bodily injuries in our workplaces. In 1998, there were 279 deaths, 4,330 injuries requiring hospitalisation, 6,189 injuries requiring medical treatment and 3,921 injuries arising from road accidents. In 1997-98, only four people presented at Queensland hospitals after being struck by lightning. In 1998-99, there were 10.

In the same period in Queensland, I have been unable to identify a single substantiated case of death, serious injury or ill health arising out of a backflow incident in a public sector building. Backflow does present some risk to the community. However, it is important to put this risk into its proper perspective. The committee has found in its majority report that, whereas high risk sites do exist, backflow presents only a minimal risk overall to public health, it is easily prevented and current public sector backflow prevention programs are an appropriate management response. On the evidence presented to the committee, backflow occurrences are highly unlikely and the chance of it occurring in public sector buildings is being incrementally reduced by the application of sound management principles.

In the period leading up to the inquiry, there was a great deal of hysteria generated around the backflow issue. The significant question arising from all of this is this: where have all these dangerous backflow incidents been occurring? During the inquiry, a number of alleged backflow incidents were placed before the committee. All of the incidents investigated, except one minor incident in the private sector, could not be substantiated. One celebrated case involved the claim that a Sydney pensioner had died after drinking water contaminated by backflow. The facts were that the incident was taken from a training video used by Sydney Water to outline a potential outcome of a hypothetical backflow incident. It simply did not happen.

Public sector agencies are implementing appropriate risk management strategies to minimise the risk of backflow in Government buildings. The fact that we are not experiencing catastrophic effects from backflow suggests that they are effectively managing this risk.
