



Speech by

Mr ROB MITCHELL

MEMBER FOR CHARTERS TOWERS

Hansard 29 April 1999

QUEENSLAND FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY AMENDMENT REGULATION (No. 1) 1999
Disallowance of Statutory Instrument

Mr MITCHELL (Charters Towers—NPA) (10.49 p.m.): I am pleased to rise to support the disallowance motion moved by the member for Mirani. It is not only frustrating but downright shameful that I must stand in this House tonight and debate this motion for the disallowance of a fire levy increase. In the PricewaterhouseCoopers report on the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority, commissioned, I might add, by the Beattie Government, the issue of fire levies as a contribution to the current and prospective state of the QFRA finances is listed last in every section of the report. Of the eight key issues identified by the professional, highly experienced financial consultants as being contributing factors to the financial problems of the QFRA, the issue of fire levies is listed last. In fact, under the heading "Main Causes of the Deterioration in the Financial Position", which appears on page 10 of the Beattie Government commissioned report, the issue of fire levies does not even rate a mention.

On the same page of this report, the eminently qualified practitioners recommended three options to redress this situation and generate sufficient funds. They were: an annual compounding increase in the levy of 3.8%—not 14%—above the CPI for five years, then reverting to annual CPI adjustments; an annual compounding 4.5% decrease in operational expenditure for a period of five years; or some combination of both variables. Nowhere in the 90-page document have I found any advice or even reference to the blanket 14% increase as proposed by this Minister.

Let us have a look at the background from the PricewaterhouseCoopers report. The QFRA was established on 24 February 1997 as a result of the Staib review in 1996, which recommended a restructure of the old Labor QFS. The diagnosis of the funding shortfalls points out that the service was underfunded for a number of years. Leivesley believed that the fire service was underfunded by \$40m; Staib believed it was approximately \$30m. Who was in Government in those years? The Goss Labor Government! This has come back to bite it. What has happened? The Labor Party bites the taxpayer to fund its mismanagement of six years.

Not only has the Premier completely reneged on his pre-election promise not to increase taxes or charges at a rate above the CPI, but he has ridden roughshod over his commitment to the people of Queensland to manage the business of Government in an efficient, cost-effective manner. He has completely ignored the recommendations of his appointed experts and turned straight to ordinary Queenslanders—the battlers, the workers—to solve his problems.

As other members on this side of the House have already indicated tonight, the Premier's scheme to slug the average Queensland community highlights his complete lack of integrity and his total inability to manage this State. While he is racing around the State running regional Cabinets, attending forums and requesting deputations from Queensland communities, he is totally ignoring the advice and recommendations of his highly paid advisers.

Mrs Edmond: You are not going to pass the same speech around.

Mr MITCHELL: I beg your pardon.

While he is holding media conference after media conference, making gratuitous and apparently generous funding grants to community groups with one hand, he is grabbing every

opportunity possible to delve into the pockets of those same needy people with the other. This is the only way that Labor knows how to balance its books. Rather than implementing and managing Government business according to best practice principles, he is solving his management problems by penalising ordinary Queenslanders.

In 1997 when the coalition Government established the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority, it was recognised that the organisation required a total overhaul. It was acknowledged that the Goss Government had completely ignored adequate funding allocations for the upgrade and replacement of buildings and equipment. It was accepted that wage and salary rates for our fire and rescue workers were in desperate need of significant catch-up increases. The Borbidge Government understood that, to make sure that every Queenslander had access to a service which met the needs of its communities, a major overhaul and restructure was required.

Now the Beattie Government has brought a halt to sensible, sustainable restructure and turned to the ordinary Queenslanders to provide a quick-fix solution which will make the Premier look good when the QFRA books are inspected. His solution is not to follow the recommendations of his appointed independent advisers; his solution is not to follow the advice of the council of the QFRA management and board; his solution is to strike out at ordinary Queenslanders, including the people who work for the service.

Anyone who has ever been in business and has been associated with business or corporate organisations knows that the implementation of new initiatives takes time, particularly when the organisation is attempting to overcome years of mismanagement. Before members on the other side of the House jump up and down and declare that it was the coalition Government that caused the situation, they should think about this: the amalgamation of the fire boards under the Goss Government from 1992 to 1995 saw the fire service inherit approximately \$57m in debt. In addition, loans were taken out to fund the shortfalls in the change of funding from the insurance-based system to the property-based system. The net repayment of these loans to date is \$43m. This has severely hindered attempted improvements to fire service delivery and contributed to the drain on the State fire service trust fund, through which the QFRA operates.

The Labor Government's solutions to these situations is to stop purchasing equipment and allow our appliances to continue to operate beyond their life expectancy, stop maintaining this ageing equipment, stop land acquisition planning for the placement of new fire stations and stop employing the staff required to ensure effective management of business services. Now it has come up with an even better solution: make every Queenslanders pay for its recurrent mistakes; dump its pre-election promises; convince the Queensland community that this appalling increase in the fire levy is not its fault; lay the blame at the feet of the previous coalition Government, which sought long-term solutions to these long-term problems; increase the fire levy by 14% now; and, when the next election comes around, hope that the community has forgotten that the Beattie Government forced them to provide the solution to this Government's and the Goss Government's mismanagement of essential services.

A fire levy increase of 14% is unjustifiable. No-one in this House denies that the QFRA requires additional funding and resources. Nobody here will argue against ensuring our emergency services reach and lead the world's best practice standards. What I do dispute, though, and censure is the need for the supposedly caring, battler friendly, accountable Government passing the buck of its responsibility and its management to the community. What I abhor is the total lack of respect that this Government has paid to every Queenslanders by assuming that they would accept a 14% increase without question.

Here we have it again: when the going gets tough and the Labor Government cannot budget enough, the battler, the worker and the home and landowner have to pay the dump. Tonight we have heard the slug on third-party insurance for these people to drive their own car, a slug to have a steak meal and a slug on people to run their own abattoirs in their small communities and a slug on the protection of the home and belongings for a service of the QFRA. This is all on top of the increase in land valuations, which will also be added to their rates come August this year. Local government, the collector of rate payments, will cop the brunt of the anger of taxpayers for all these additional imposts created by this can't do Labor Government.

Before I finish, I wish to take this opportunity to thank all those members right across Queensland—there has been a great representation in Charters Towers—of the QFRA, ambulance and emergency services for their support of the Leukaemia Foundations' Shave for a Cure day. It was a tremendous effort by all for a very worthy cause.

A Government member interjected.

Mr MITCHELL: I declined the offer, yes.
