



Speech by

Mr T. MALONE

MEMBER FOR MIRANI

Hansard 29 April 1999

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

Disallowance of Statutory Instrument

Mr MALONE (Mirani—NPA) (10.15 p.m.): I move—

"That the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority Amendment Regulation (No. 1) 1999 (Subordinate Legislation No. 63 of 1999) tabled in the Parliament on 27 April 1999, be disallowed."

It is an absolute shame that the Opposition has to endeavour to keep the Government accountable after the Premier's "cross my heart and hope to die" letter to the member for Nicklin assuring him that there would be no new taxes or increased taxes if he supported the formation of a Labor Government under Mr Beattie. There is no doubt that ordinary voters must feel disillusioned with Governments when, in election mode or in forming a Government, politicians promise all things to all people, but as soon as they get themselves into power they go back on their promises. They seem to get their butts on the Treasury leather and forget about the people they represent.

However, this Labor Government goes one step further. It not only breaks its original promise but it continues to portray in the media and elsewhere that it is a Government which is caring, battler-friendly, accountable—and all the other feel-good, God-fearing words that the media junkie Premier has at his disposal. However, at the same time the Premier has his hands in people's pockets and is ripping out cash left, right and centre to appease his Budget-challenged Government.

The three major issues that we are discussing tonight are compulsory third-party insurance, the meat inspection fees and the fire levy. The Premier's thirst for cash knows no bounds. Previous speakers have detailed the extremes of this Government. It is all about ordinary people in the community—the battlers—the very people that the Premier and his Labor Government purports to represent. These are the good and decent people who are trying to earn a living in these very difficult times. Life would be great for those people who do not own a car or enjoy a piece of steak or own a block of land. Surely there would not be many things that are as important to people trying to have a go as wheels, a steak and a bit of dirt.

If it were not so serious it would be quite hilarious. The fire levy increase of 14% has widespread implications. Not only does it impact on mums and dads, on urban blocks, on vacant blocks and on rural blocks, but it also impacts on commercial properties including churches, small corner stores, schools, butcher shops and sporting venues. All of these things are cornerstone services and businesses within our community.

Most honourable members in this House would have noticed that small businesses in our communities are going through tough times with unfair trading practices. Most honourable members would also have heard the phrase "the straw that broke the camel's back". I suggest to fellow members that a 14% increase in the fire levy could be just that straw.

I wonder how many small businesses would be able to justify a 14% increase in rent. There would be a massive outcry and it would be claimed that it is foul play. We have a Government in Queensland that is doing that very thing. All honourable members who have run a business would understand that as an increase in rents or other charges 14% in one year is unacceptable.

At this point, I have to say that I have the highest regard for the staff and the volunteers of the emergency services. The officers, staff and the auxiliaries of the QFRA are at the very top. Quite often,

the work that they perform within our communities means the difference between life and death. They are out there when the going gets tough. As we all know, the Labor Government commissioned its own report into the financial operations of the QFRA—the PricewaterhouseCoopers saga as we have come to know it—and it highlighted the fact that 20% of all call-outs—

Mr Schwarten interjected.

Mr MALONE: The member should just listen. The report highlighted the fact that 20% of all the call-outs were for rescue operations and that there was insufficient funding for this component to be sustainable.

The Minister is keen to lay the blame for underfunding on the coalition Government. However, even in this one area it can be seen clearly that the Goss Government handed the responsibility for rescues to the fire service without allocating additional funding. This is just the tip of the iceberg. Questions such as community service obligations and fair assessments of dues to be levied on properties that have the protection of the Crown must be addressed. This matter was raised in the PricewaterhouseCoopers report. Government owned corporations and Government instrumentalities are huge landowners in Queensland. The coalition Government recognised this and other shortfalls relative to funding.

Firstly, it recognised that Emergency Services has to be run in a commercial and accountable manner in order to achieve a sustainable and ongoing leading-edge service. To achieve that, the QFRA board was established and in its short life was turning around and achieving in terms of addressing the longstanding and entrenched debt, which was the hallmark of the Goss Government.

Who in this House could forget the facade of the Minister for Emergency Services in the Goss Government outside this place addressing a public demonstration by the Queensland Fire Service over staffing and pay? I can remember it clearly, and I am sure that there are others in this House who also remember it.

Mr SCHWARTEN: I rise to a point of order. What the firefighters of the day were complaining about was the underfunding of the service, which has been addressed by this Government and this Minister.

Mr SPEAKER: That is not a point of order.

Mr MALONE: I can clearly remember the very high esteem in which those firefighters held the Minister after he addressed them that day. It was well documented in the media for several days. I think that we all still remember that.

Mr Schwarten: I was there; you weren't.

Mr MALONE: I was there, too. As I said, the coalition recognised these shortfalls and gave the officers of the fire service their first real pay increase in quite a long time. I know many in the service who recognise and acknowledge that. The coalition was also in the process of increasing staff levels and, I might add, without increasing fire levies. With prudent planning and careful budgeting, the board was heading in the right direction and needed only a little more time to successfully steer the debt-ridden Titanic on to its proper course. Time is of the essence, and was of the essence. Anyone in this House with even the slightest amount of business sense would find it difficult to argue that point. Indeed, the coalition Government was so committed to achieving that complete turnaround that it approved an additional \$3.8m in funding in the mid-year Budget allocation to address this long-term underlying debt.

The PricewaterhouseCoopers report, which was in the hands of the Labor Government prior to this year's Budget, indicated a number of areas which had to be addressed in order to achieve a meaningful outcome. Yet these issues were not even canvassed in the Government's Budget papers for 1998-99. However, I believe that what is of great concern to all thinking people is that in having the Minister brood over this infamous report for almost nine months, the slick chick that hatched was nothing more than a simple grab for cash from the pockets of hardworking Queenslanders. Many times the Minister has stood in this House and crowed about the findings of this report.

I refer again to that infamous report. It is quite interesting to note that, in recent letters to the editor around the State, the Minister is critical of me for not attending a briefing on that report. I recollect that, during the last sitting of Parliament, the Minister made an offer to brief the Leader of the Opposition. However, at that time the Opposition Leader was on leave due to illness and I believe that the Deputy National Party Leader made an offer to attend in his absence, which I understand was refused. Sadly, I have to inform the House, as I believe that the Minister may have been misinformed, that I have never received an invitation to participate in a briefing by either the Minister or her staff. Unfortunately, I have had to respond to the Minister's personal attack on me in order to uphold my good name. I have to say that I am particularly disappointed in the way in which the Minister has handled this matter.

It is interesting to note that in the report, commissioned by the Labor Party and paid for by the taxes of Queenslanders, there are some very interesting highlights relating to the amalgamation of fire boards when the Goss Government came to power. There was \$57m worth of debt. The report goes on to say that this hindered the operations of the QFRA to some extent. No doubt that is quite an understatement.

It is also interesting to note that, during the period of the former Labor Government, despite all the promises that were made in relation to the amalgamation of the boards little effort was made to reduce significantly the debt levels in the QFRA's trust fund. However, it seems to me that at no time has this Labor-generated report, the PricewaterhouseCoopers report, advocated an increase of 14% in fire levies as the single answer to the problems of the QFRA.

Mr Swarten interjected.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! The Minister! Order!

Mr MALONE: There certainly was a suggestion of multiple scenarios and multiple solutions to the debt situation. One would have to say that it was all so easy for Labor to go out and put its hands into the pockets of ordinary Queenslanders to prop up its inability to properly address this debt. Of course, more importantly, we have seen the Minister give into the power players of the Labor Party by sacking the board and handing the running of the QFRA back to the bureaucrats within the department. Roll on Yes, Minister.
