



Speech by

Mr T. MALONE

MEMBER FOR MIRANI

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ROAD TRANSPORT REFORM BILL

Mr MALONE (Mirani—NPA) (5.15 p.m.): I rise to speak to this significant piece of legislation, the Road Transport Reform Bill. Yesterday, my colleague the shadow Minister for Transport and Main Roads mentioned the Traffic Regulations, and I endorse his comments. Road transport legislation is perhaps the most important legislation that this House deals with, because it is the legislation that the people of Queensland deal with every day. It is because of the importance of this legislation that I agree that uniformity between States is critical if we are to have a safe and efficient transport system. It is obviously also critical for commercial transport operations and the tourism industry, particularly leading up to the 2000 Olympics.

There are a number of issues that I would like to speak about as they impact on issues in my electorate, particularly in relation to the sugar industry. The shadow Minister raised the definition of "road" as proposed in the Bill. While I am sure that the definition proposed may be appropriate in other States, I am concerned that its application in Queensland may be a little different. I ask the Minister to consider how this definition is likely to impact on the current arrangements affecting the movement of vehicles on or between farms.

Mr Bredhauer: We are going to amend that. It is in the amendments. We have fixed that.

Mr MALONE: I am pleased about that. The definition of "road" will impact on whether vehicles are required to be registered or not. I point out to the Minister that in farming there is a heavy use of haul roads that traverse farms. They are not necessarily dedicated roads or even gazetted roads. Therefore, the legislation could impact fairly severely if farm vehicles have to be registered. I take on board what the Minister is saying. If amendments were not being made, there could be a huge economic impact on production in our area.

Under the new legislation, it will be interesting to see how the Traffic Regulations will apply in areas such as beaches that are currently regarded as roads. In common with the shadow Minister, I await the Minister's explanation of what is a very complex interrelationship with a large body of the Queensland legislation.

In his second-reading speech, the Minister emphasised that the Government would be undertaking an educational program to ensure that road users are made familiar with the changes to the regulations. I suggest to the Minister that the way that the information is communicated can be very important. Certain categories of road users, such as elderly drivers—and the previous speaker mentioned the same issue—will need specific attention to ensure that they are not confused by what will be essentially only a very small number of changes.

I also note that the Bill makes provision for the medical profession to take more specific action to ensure that drivers who are not capable of driving have their licence status reviewed. The legislation affords protection for medical practitioners in providing this information to the licensing authorities as a means of encouraging doctors to ensure that they take a broader view of medical conditions and their impact on road safety. That will certainly be a good thing. The coalition proposes to support this legislation provided that the Minister is able to give satisfactory explanations and assurances about how the changed definition of a "road" is likely to impact on the present arrangements. I take on board what he has said previously.

Road transport has a huge impact on the economic wellbeing of Queensland, as we are such a decentralised State. The haulage of freight and foodstuffs throughout the State at a reasonable cost is the cornerstone to small towns and rural communities maintaining an economic base and supporting the families who live in them. The introduction of the GST and reduced fuel costs for the transport industry will have a huge impact in terms of delivering benefits to rural communities.

However, I am sorry to have to say that the road infrastructure in rural Queensland does not seem to be able to keep pace with the basic need. Even though we are in support of the legislation, there are a number of issues that I wish to bring to the attention of the House. I know that other members have raised the concerns of the general public in relation to the free call centre in Queensland, from which callers are put on hold and made to listen to mind-dulling music or useless information. It is about time this was sorted out and the department delivered the service that Queenslanders deserve.

Another area of concern to me relates to the registration of heavy vehicles. There was a scheme in place that gave two months leeway for an owner to obtain a certificate of inspection. This Government has cancelled that initiative and owners now have to present a certificate of inspection before registration can be effected. This may be okay in Brisbane, where there are minimal waiting times for inspections. However, in areas such as Mackay—and I dare say in many other rural areas and regional centres—owners have to wait for up to six weeks for an inspection on their vehicle. If the vehicle does not pass the first inspection, they may have to wait for a further period—as I said, sometimes up to six weeks—for reinspection.

As honourable members can imagine this places a huge impost on owners of vehicles who are tied to a busy schedule. I believe that the process has to be more flexible. Going back to the old system may be worth while. Prime movers are expensive and cannot be held up from their work, especially line-haul work or where there is a schedule to be met. As I said earlier, I think that the system needs to be a bit more flexible. Haulage is a very competitive operation and the department needs to be aware of the imposts on operators through a lack of flexibility in this regard.

In 1992 the Sugar Act was proclaimed by the Goss Labor Government. It provided for the transferability of assignments on cane land between mill areas and, therefore, allowed the transport of large amounts of cane along highways and, probably more importantly, on secondary roads which were never really designed to carry semitrailers or B-doubles. Indeed, a lot of the secondary roads were graded and given a bitumen spray and have lasted for 20 years. But when heavy vehicles go over them, particularly in wet weather, they do not take long to break up.

In my electorate, local governments are experiencing great difficulty in dealing with this problem. My colleague the member for Hinchinbrook mentioned this as an issue in the northern areas. Local governments are having to rebuild ahead of time roads that were not in their capital works program. They are also having to rebuild bridges that are not due for replacement. As a last resort, they have placed load limits on roads, much to the annoyance of local residents and at great inconvenience to those people who have utilised the provisions in the Sugar Act to expand their operations and grow sugarcane in areas where there has not previously been production.

This is a matter that should have been addressed at the time of introducing the Bill into the House. Provision should have been made at that time for looking at the impacts of the industry on that infrastructure. The current situation is not sustainable and is placing a huge impost on local government throughout the sugar growing areas of coastal Queensland. Under the Act, growers have the ability to produce cane within economic road haulage distances of a sugar mill without due consideration of the impact on the road system. The State and the Government have gained economic benefit from this, but there has been no commitment to expand the road system to cater for the additional cane haulage.

The national driver licensing scheme is long overdue and will lead to better policing and less confusion among the States. Also, the introduction of uniform road rules will make travelling throughout Australia far safer and enhance the peace of mind of local road users and interstate and overseas travellers.

The provision that gives a power to outlaw the use of hand-held mobile telephones while driving is to be commended. I believe that a lot of politicians will now have to rethink their communications strategies when working their electorate. I am fortunate enough to have a hands-free mobile phone, but it is an analogue and will be extinct in the near future. A lot of areas do not have mobile phone coverage so it does not really make much difference. I commend the Bill to the House.
