



Speech by

Mr T. MALONE

MEMBER FOR MIRANI

Hansard 27 October 1999

**APPROPRIATION BILL
Estimates Committee B
Report**

Mr MALONE (Mirani—NPA) (3.22 p.m.): It gives me a great deal of pleasure to speak to the report of Estimates Committee B. It became very clear during the Estimates committee process that the Government's acceptance of the equity return will have a huge impact not only on all the budgets throughout the department but more especially on Emergency Services. It was a tax that the Treasury sprung on the Government. I believe it was a con. The Government accepted it. Even though fully funded by Government this year, the liability that will impact on next year's budget will be generated during this coming year.

The 6% Beattie tax will have a negative impact on small fire and ambulance stations in regional and rural Queensland where they will have to be judged to pay their way. This is economic rationalism at its worst. It is back to the good old days of the previous Goss Government, which closed down courthouses, police stations and railway lines. Already in my electorate we have seen a move to close one of our small country schools. The Premier is well aware of that, because a letter was passed to him about it. That is occurring at a time when the Budget has not yet even been passed.

To me, one of the most important matters raised during the hearings was the matter of the State Government support for local government in respect of SES groups and more particularly the cadets. The non-supply of equipment, even to the extent of overalls, certainly was another issue. Most members would realise that, more and more, the SES volunteers are taking on the work of departmental officers, whether they be police, Emergency Services or, for that matter, in some cases the Army. Tasks such as searching for missing persons, assistance at murder scenes and the collection of evidence in criminal cases, particularly at regional and rural areas, are taking up more and more of our volunteers' time. Increasingly, local government is having to top up budgets for SES groups in their shires because of the increasing workload. That is saving the State Government many thousands of dollars every year and will continue to do so. To her credit, the Minister answered my question in respect of this matter when she said that there was no additional funding in this budget to cover local government costs in meeting those extra workloads. Local governments are clearly annoyed that they have been subsidising the State Government in terms of those additional services. I know that they have made many representations to the Minister on this matter.

In relation to the transfer of the Hinchinbrook rural fire brigade at Ingham from the administrative region of Charters Towers, which is run out of Townsville, to the administrative region of Innisfail, local firefighters are definitely of the opinion that they were not properly consulted in this matter. They continue to believe that. Townsville is a little over an hour away from Ingham, whereas Innisfail is more than two and a half hours away. The major resources and support equipment are available only at Townsville and Cairns, not at Innisfail. The Minister is clearly mistaken if she thinks that this issue will go away. The volunteers are adamant that they want to belong to the Townsville region rather than Innisfail. I know that bureaucrats are driving the issue, but the Minister needs to take control and bring some commonsense back into the equation.

The issue of staffing at fire stations with permanent full-time staff continues to be a thorn in the side of Emergency Services. These issues are of major concern mostly in respect of regional and rural

communities. There is a real fear that, in the end, communities will be worse off in terms of effective response times and, in effect, suffer a downgrading of services. The Minister's response to my questions do not give any real level of assurance that she was totally confident of a good result.

Finally, I wish to place on record my thanks to the executive directors of Emergency Services who contributed to the Estimates process. I congratulate them on the courteous and professional manner in which they conducted themselves during the hearings. I also make particular mention of the many staff members who attended the hearings. It certainly demonstrates that Emergency Services is a hands-on department. They should be recognised for their dedication and commitment.
