



Speech by

Mr T. MALONE

MEMBER FOR MIRANI

Hansard 8 December 1999

STATE COUNTER-DISASTER ORGANISATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr MALONE (Mirani—NPA) (12.38 p.m.): From the outset I wish to assure the House that the Opposition is supporting this Bill. There is no doubt that this Bill will address an urgent need, one which has been highlighted by rather ominous threats of problems arising at midnight on 31 December this year. However, the need for amendments to the Act was already there because the definition of "disaster" is prescriptive and imposes limitations. While this was seen as adequate when drafted in 1975, rapid changes over the intervening years have created the need for a broader approach to disaster management. I was a little intrigued and concerned by a statement the Minister made in her second-reading speech when she said—

"We are drawing up a plan we believe will never be necessary."

The Minister is probably being a little naive if she honestly believes it will never be necessary to implement this plan. I certainly hope that sort of thinking does not pervade the organisations and individuals charged with the responsibility of developing our disaster management systems and implementing counter-disaster measures.

I can assure the Minister that I am not trying to invoke Murphy's law, but I would urge her and all those responsible for counter-disaster measures not to regard Queensland's State disaster plan as one that will never be necessary. Indeed, I am not a pessimist, but I believe firmly that the plan will be necessary. It will be constantly referred to and will need to be implemented in the foreseeable future. Any ministerial complacency should be ignored and discounted.

In 1975, less than 25 years ago, one could not see the need for a broadening of the definition of "disaster" within the Act. Anyone who talked about the millennium bug at that time would probably have been carted away by men in white coats. It was probably only about three years ago that people started to get excited about the potential problems of the so-called Y2K bug. Suddenly there was a realisation that our dependence on computers and computerised equipment had placed us in a very difficult and probably dangerous situation. We can all remember the emergence of publicity which highlighted the potential problems, and even then most comments were centred around topics such as flying and concerns about planes falling out of the sky. People started to realise that their personal computers might throw panic attacks, but the seriousness of the situation slowly grew to immense proportions when the provision of essential services was brought into the equation.

I do not intend to go into detail about the Y2K problems or potential problems, because they are just one element of the amendments to this Act, which have been the subject of extensive coverage. These amendments will extend to the legal basis for the operation of the State's emergency services. As the Minister has already pointed out, they ensure that the definition of "disaster" in the Act is broadened to allow the appropriate disaster response to be undertaken at any time in the future should an essential service or infrastructure system fail or be disrupted.

In recent months, there has been a lot of talk about Governments, Government agencies, Government owned enterprises and especially local authorities being underprepared for the year 2000. In fact, the Minister for Communication and Information and Minister for Local Government, Planning, Regional and Rural Communities has been very vocal on several occasions, trying to jolt some of these organisations into faster and more positive action. I have no doubt that the Minister saw the need for

that type of prodding and public criticism and, if the need was there, I certainly hope that the Minister achieved his aims.

But this type of public stoning should also be accompanied by the supply of resources—something that has not been forthcoming from the Department of Emergency Services. The Minister will remember the question I asked her during Estimates, and she will also remember her very definite answer. This passage has been quoted a number of times. I asked the Minister—

"Can you actually specify any additional funding that will go to local governments to overcome the problem they have in terms of actual funding, in some instances, on almost a 50/50 basis with the SES? In my own region it is having a fair impact on local government."

The Minister responded—

"There is no additional funding in the budget."

The Minister then went on to talk about consultation with the Local Government Association of Queensland concerning looking at alternative ways in which the Government might be able to assist local government, and about looking at funding as a whole through a funding review. It was hardly a convincing response. It was certainly not an encouraging response for local government.

This amendment Bill is being pushed through the Parliament because of the urgency of the situation. The Opposition acknowledges that Y2K problems could cause a disaster. In her second-reading speech the Minister said—

"In today's complex world new challenges would be presented if any of our essential services suffered a major disruption or malfunction. A failure in an essential service could have serious ripple effects on other essential services and infrastructure systems. A failure in an essential service such as water or sewerage or power could have a significant adverse impact on the operations of Government and the private sector."

The urgency of this amendment Bill is therefore emphasised and acknowledged, but the same urgency to assist local government to help cope with potential emergencies is ignored. That type of assistance can wait for consultations and reviews, all of which will occur after 31 December 1999.

I should point out that, more than 12 months ago, this Government announced that it would be paying consultants to develop year 2000 contingency plans for the State's electricity, water and sewerage facilities. Quite rightly, the Government saw the need to work quickly to deal with potential problems and spared no expense when it brought in consultants to help with the work. I commend the Government for that initiative. However, the loosening of the money belt did not extend to local government as far as SES resources were concerned. The Department of Emergency Services left local authorities to face these potential problems on their own. Many local authorities throughout the State would not have spare money to throw at consultants to help prepare for failures in essential services. There are not too many local authorities that are flush with funds, yet this Government is insisting on them shouldering an unfair burden when it comes to the provision of emergency services.

Undoubtedly, if an emergency was declared, State funds would be made available. But what about the planning and preparation that is involved in drawing up disaster plans? Enormous amounts of time and resources are required and have been expended by local authorities throughout the State to get them as far as they are now. There are many instances of some local authorities dragging the chain in their efforts to achieve compliance, but many of them are working on their own without the luxury of a bank of consultants and an apparently unlimited bank account to help them.

The Minister has been a very vocal supporter of volunteers during her reign as Minister for Emergency Services. I wholeheartedly support her approach. She has spent an exorbitant amount of time travelling the State, handing out certificates of appreciation, all of which are undoubtedly well deserved. However, mouthing platitudes and expressing undying devotion to volunteers is one thing; backing up those flowery sentiments is another.

This Government has a poor track record when it comes to supporting volunteers, other than saying the right things at the right politically advantageous moment. One has simply to look at the utter disdain shown to rural fire volunteers in the Hinchinbrook Shire to see who is important and who is not important in the eyes of this Government. In that instance, the volunteers were completely ignored. Not only were they ignored, but they were treated as complaining idiots when they raised objections to the way in which they were treated. It concerns me that this State will be left without proper protection if this Government continues to get our volunteers offside.

When it comes to disaster management, I am sure we have the plans in place to cope with most situations. What worries me is that our network of volunteers—the people who work their guts out to provide as much protection to our communities as possible—are becoming so disillusioned that they might walk away in disgust. This amendment Bill offers our volunteers and paid staff the protection they need to step in when the occasion arises. It allows them to get the job done without fear of

unreasonable reprisals or vindictive actions and attitudes. That is why the Opposition is supporting the Bill. These people need protection, and it is being provided.

But legal protection is one thing; meaningful, on-the-ground support from Government is another matter altogether and this Government is failing hopelessly on that count. Instead of giving resources, this Government is giving words. Unfortunately, volunteers and emergency services in all their forms cannot survive on words.

I am not an advocate of Governments throwing money into services simply for the sake of looking good. I would not advocate pouring limitless amounts of money into emergency services unless the people of Queensland receive good value for that money. I do believe, however, that if this Government is going to ask more and more of its volunteers, and put more and more responsibility on local authorities, it has to be prepared to give more support and provide more resources.

This Bill has the support of the Opposition because it provides protection to the thousands of volunteers who are spread throughout the State. It backs up the work being done by emergency service workers and supports their efforts in times of disaster. I only hope that, when these volunteers and paid staff are faced with the next disaster and have to go into the field to protect the lives and property of Queenslanders, they have not only the goodwill of the Minister but also the resources to do the job properly.
