



Speech by

Tony ELLIOTT

MEMBER FOR CUNNINGHAM

Hansard 25 & 26 August 1999

ROAD TRANSPORT REFORM BILL

Mr ELLIOTT (Cunningham—NPA) (5.49 p.m.): There are a few issues that I would like to raise in particular. Firstly, I wish to support some remarks that were made by my colleagues who represent Toowoomba or parts of it, particularly in relation to the Toowoomba range crossing. I know that the Minister has some concerns—as we do—about getting more funding from the Federal Government. We had a deputation with the Federal Leader of the National Party, Mr Anderson, at the recent Rockhampton—

Mr Bredhauer: He is Deputy Prime Minister now. You might like to catch up.

Mr ELLIOTT: Yes, I got that. We had a meeting with him at the Rockhampton conference, that is, the members who represent Toowoomba and parts of it. He indicated clearly to us that funding is now coming through for property acquisitions and so on, but that if things were left the way they are at the moment it would be a fairly long time before we received other funding. We indicated that that really was not acceptable because of the problems and the number of crashes that are occurring on the Toowoomba range.

More and more trucks are using the range crossing every day of the week. This is an ongoing problem. It is not going to get any better, and it can only get worse, especially if we experience wetter seasons, which is on the cards. Over the past 10 or 15 years, we have had a series of abnormally dry seasons on the Darling Downs. But if we start experiencing very wet seasons with storms and constant misty rain on the range, which is normal, more and more accidents will occur on that road. It is as simple as that. I do not know how many people have to die or how many disastrous accidents have to occur on that road before something is done about it.

Not long ago, I had personal experience of the problems on the Toowoomba range road when I had to pick up my kids who were coming up from Brisbane on buses. There was an accident on the range, which closed the road totally. Traffic was diverted along Murphys Creek Road, but then there was an accident on that road and it was also closed. Traffic was then re-routed around Cunningham's Gap. Kids who have been sitting on a bus for five or six hours are not terribly amused by things like that—not to mention the costs to commerce and industry.

Our main concern is the danger of loss of life of the people who are driving trucks over that range or people who are involved in accidents through no fault of their own. The state of that road is not acceptable at the moment. Something must be done to bring forward the upgrade of that range crossing. I urge the Minister to do everything that he possibly can, and to get together with the Deputy Prime Minister, to ensure that that whole upgrade program is brought forward within a realistic time frame. I do not believe that the projected time frame is good enough when one considers the problems that are already being experienced on the Toowoomba range crossing.

I have another issue of concern, and I would appreciate an answer from the Minister about this in his reply. And if he is unable to provide that answer, then perhaps his advisers might be able to provide me with the information that I require. I have received a number of requests in my electorate office about the proposed changes to the towing regulations as they affect private vehicles, utes and light trucks that are towing big trailers that are fitted with override brakes and electric braking systems. This affects large, heavy private vehicles, utes, heavy four-wheel drives and so on. This issue has been a major bone of contention for many people in my electorate. Whereas they have been able to do certain things under the regulations in Queensland, when they have gone into New South Wales the RTA people have told them, "You can't do that, because what you are towing is heavier than the towing vehicle." If we take that to its logical conclusion, we would have to say that no prime mover in

Australia is able to tow anything heavier than about eight or nine tonnes—which we all know is just ridiculous. We have to maintain a balance.

The manufacturers' specifications are effectively recommendations in respect of what vehicles are capable of towing. I thought that uniform towing regulations were being introduced with this change; that all States would have the same regulations as those applicable in Queensland; and that vehicles could tow whatever the manufacturer's specifications stated. Therefore, there would be some uniformity in the towing regulations, so that people could tow something from Queensland into New South Wales or Victoria without facing problems. I would appreciate the Minister's officers being able to advise me on that issue.

I turn now to wide loads—whether it be agricultural equipment or indivisible loads—being moved on highways and on arterial roads, particularly on the Darling Downs, the western downs, the southern downs and down to the border around Goondiwindi and so on. Wide loads create a large number of problems. There is a tremendous amount of anger amongst members of those communities about this because, every time they turn around, someone changes the rules.

For years, wide loads were preceded by vehicles carrying signs reading "Danger Wide Load Following" or "Danger Wide Load". But then some clever character came along and said, "That is no good. You can be taken to court because you have admitted that there is danger in it." Then signs of a particular colour were introduced to warn of oversized loads. In Western Australia, the signs say "Over Width". We really need some uniformity in this, and I understand that we are moving towards that now. We definitely need to consider the practicalities of all these problems in an endeavour to create a situation in which people who run agricultural properties in particular are able to comply with these regulations.

Nobody has a problem with flashing lights on vehicles. Everyone understands that flashing lights are necessary to warn people of possibly dangerous situations, and they can be seen from a long distance away. Anyone with any brains who sees a flashing light would realise that that is a warning sign of a potential hazard. It could be the police, the ambulance or the fire brigade—depending on what colour it is—or it could be the local authority working on the road, or it could be an approaching oversized load. That is the first tenet.

The second tenet is the use of two-way radios. People with two-way radios are able to warn traffic approaching narrow bridges—particularly heavy vehicles, because light vehicles should be able to pull up in time. When entering some states of America, there are big signs stating, "You are now entering an agricultural area. Beware of agricultural equipment. It has right of way." There is a similar sign near Gatton that says in part, "Beware of Aerial Spraying" or something like that. People in America have to give right of way to agricultural equipment and wide machinery on roads other than freeways and main highways, which would be the equivalent of our arterial roads in Queensland.

In the Goondiwindi area, two or three properties share the same plant, which has to be transported by road. Although that wide gear folds up, it still takes up the whole width of the road in many areas. So they have to find places where they can get that equipment off the road so that people can pass them. Quite frankly, it is a lot easier to get a car, a ute or a normal passenger vehicle off the road and into a little pocket beside a tree and out of the way than it is to get these wide pieces of equipment off the road.

I believe that we are going about this issue back to front. We need to understand the problems that are involved in shifting this type of equipment and the dangers that are faced by the people who are operating it and trying to move it. It is great to see the work that has been done on the road between Millmerran and Goondiwindi. In the old days, it was the greatest disaster when wide gear was being shifted along that road. There were great drop-offs on the edge of the road, it was not very wide, and if someone coming in the opposite direction did not show courtesy and give way to that equipment, it was forced over the edge.

Mr ELLIOTT (Cunningham—NPA) (11.30 a.m.), continuing: When the debate was adjourned I was dealing with the question of wide loads. This morning I would like to refer to the issues involved in moving modular buildings. This is a matter of great concern to people in my electorate and in other areas. Modular buildings are getting bigger and wider. They are also getting higher, which precludes them from being put on trucks in order to be moved.

We have to look at the height problem of modular buildings. Some of the older modular buildings are only fractionally too high when they are placed on a normal trailer. We need to extend some leniency to enable people to move modular buildings under normal circumstances on normal trailers, provided that they use routes where there are no low bridges. In most instances, modular buildings are being moved either from the Darling Downs to central Queensland or from central Queensland to the Darling Downs, down to Goondiwindi, to the west and down as far as Moree.

By and large, modular buildings are not being transported on routes where there are low bridges. The transporters are able to map out particular routes to suit themselves. However, they have to be careful of electricity stay wires. An experienced driver transporting a modular building will be aware of the problems involved with electricity wires. The power lines themselves are high enough and do not present a problem. Sometimes stay wires can become slack and cause some difficulties. A driver who is

aware of the problem would simply move to the other side of the road and negotiate the obstacle without much difficulty.

The more modern modular buildings are really quite big. Lysaght Manufacturing in Toowoomba has developed a system of welding three-inch round blocks of steel onto the outside of a square tube frame which is placed at the bottom. A thing not unlike a road train dolly is then put inside the modular building itself. There is a clamping mechanism that goes through that. A bolt goes from the inside of the dolly to the outside and it clamps onto the three-inch round blocks. The whole thing is carried on a bogie assembly. This is quite a good way of handling the problem. Of course, they use a Bartlett ball on the front.

Some of the older modular buildings are simply too narrow to enable such an arrangement to be placed inside them. However, they still need to be moved. Obviously, a lot of them are being moved by tractors, which is probably the most practical way when they are not being moved long distances. We start to run into trouble when they have to be moved tremendous distances.

Sometimes people in the Department of Transport are a little overzealous and cause some difficulties to people who are trying to do the right thing. We do not want people doing dangerous and stupid things. Some farmers and contractors have to brush up on their techniques. At the same time, I believe that departmental officers need to exhibit some latitude and commonsense. There is a need for compromise in this situation. It is necessary that the Department of Transport gets together with the manufacturers, the contractors and the farmers and looks at practical ways of undertaking this operation.

A lot of modular buildings weigh in the region of 10, 11 or 12 tonnes. However, some weigh of the order of 4 to 6 tonnes. In these cases it is possible to use a suspension called the Al-ko suspension. This is a German invention which consists of two hexagonal tubes, one larger than the other, with rubber shoved in between the surfaces of each hexagon. The Al-ko suspension is very durable. When something is being moved on a road the suspension does not snap back. The opposite occurs with a mechanical spring. If one goes over a large bump, the mechanical spring snaps back and causes tremendous vibration through the load.

With the Al-ko suspension, one can use 750 x 16 tyres. These tyres are available in 12 and 14 ply and they have a high load rating. If these tyres are used with the Al-ko suspension, one could have a narrow enough set-up to put inside any of the older modular buildings. One could also change a wheel while on the road. Under the licence system of moving such things as modular buildings, it is impossible to change a wheel unless the whole load is taken off the vehicle.

I believe it is important that departmental officers meet with all the players involved and work on a compromise. I would be interested in facilitating such a meeting if the parties were interested. Years ago, I used to run Jondaryan Trailer Sales. The company was a manufacturer of trailers, so I know something about the subject. I would be more than interested in working with the parties in an endeavour to develop some sort of practical, reasonably priced system to move these modular buildings about.

It is an area of increasing concern to all people in the industry. It is not much use saying, "Oh, these things are too big; we can't move them." That is rubbish. We move houses, draglines and similar equipment. We move all sorts of equipment around on our roads because that is the nature of this country. We have to be able to do these things in as practical a manner as possible. We must get together and ensure that the problem is overcome. We must not pass on huge, unnecessary costs to industry.

We need to involve some of the practical people such as Rocklea Carrying and some of the country carrying firms who move a lot of multiple-width loads. These people are into extendable trailers and such things. I receive a lot of feedback from people with whom I used to deal in the old days when we were operating on Ipswich Road. I am told that there are still a lot of problems with regard to the permit system.

I would like to pay tribute to the Department of Transport for its work in several areas. It is tremendous that one can now send a fax in order to obtain a permit. This is a great use of modern technology. It is important that we keep things as flexible as possible. Moving loads on our roads is a seven-day-a-week operation. It is important that people are able to obtain a permit at short notice. Someone can go to a sale on Saturday and buy something and then need to move it. Quite often, Sunday is the best day to move these things because there are fewer vehicles on the roads. We need to be able to overcome any problems that may arise.

I think that it is essential that the Minister and his department get together with some of these people. I know that Rocklea Carrying—Donn Todd and other members of the operation—have had a great rapport with the department and have always been prepared to work in with them.

With those few words, I would like to say that we on this side recognise that the Transport Department is trying to move forward in a lot of these areas. I appreciate that. As I said, I would be more than happy to work in with them and facilitate the resolution of the problem that I alluded to earlier.