



Speech by

DESLEY BOYLE

MEMBER FOR CAIRNS

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BACKPACKER HOSTEL STANDARDS

Ms BOYLE (Cairns—ALP) (11.43 a.m.): The Childers Backpacker Hostel fire several months ago was a chilling and sobering experience for many of us in Queensland, not least for the people of Cairns. In times past, many of us have ourselves been backpackers. Many of us have had children who have travelled the world as backpackers. A similar tragedy could have happened to any of us.

I welcome the announcement by the Minister for Emergency Services of the new safety standards which will be applied to hostels. Proper processes have been announced which will ensure that higher standards are attained by all types of hostels throughout Queensland. Hostels which were not up to scratch have been faced with some difficulties.

I am pleased to report to the House that this has been a welcome period of re-examination of the standards which are offered to this very important group of visitors to Cairns and the far north. I am also pleased to report that the industry in Cairns and the far north has been more than cooperative with this re-examination because they realise that the safety of their clients is paramount if the industry is to survive.

Representatives of the fire services and the Cairns City Council have been involved in this matter. Hostels which were already operating in the far north and which had attained the expected standards have been approved. I congratulate the operators of those hostels. It is pleasing to find that the great majority of hostels in Cairns already complied with the required standards.

As a result of this re-examination, we have discovered that a lot of hostels that were operating were not properly licensed. These hostels were housed in backyards and in old homes and were not properly licensed and did not provide the necessary standards of care for these important tourists. It would appear that some of these hostels were deliberately operating illegally and some were operating in ignorance of the Government's standards. I congratulate the fire officers and the Cairns City Council officers who have worked hard to immediately resolve these problems.

I am pleased to report that there has been, in a way, a silver lining to this tremendous tragedy. Whilst this silver lining has led to increased standards in backpacker hostels throughout Queensland, it has also led to the recognition of the importance of backpacker tourism. I refer particularly to Cairns and the far north. It is recognised that Cairns is the backpacker capital of Queensland.

I am pleased to report to the House that Mr Stephen Welsh, a leader in the Cairns backpacker industry, has been appointed the president of the Queensland Backpackers and Independent Travellers Industry Association—QBITIA. Mr Welsh's leadership within the industry has surely earned him that position. It is to the advantage of the industry in Queensland that Mr Welsh is taking such an active and cooperative role in ensuring that the new standards are met.

In past years we have had difficulty in getting the message through to mainstream tourism authorities that the backpacker industry is very important and is growing at a great rate. I have some figures that will illustrate that point for members of the House. During 1999, 10% of all international visitors to Australia were classified as backpackers. That covered some 404,300 visitors to this country. Their average stay in Australia was 66 days. We are told that 79% visited New South Wales where Sydney is the main arrival point. We are also told that 66% visited Queensland and 42% visited Victoria. The average amount spent by each backpacker was \$4,245. Their average expenditure per night was

\$65. This money was spent on accommodation. The growth in this industry in the years 1998 and 1999 was 28% as compared with 7% for all other tourism markets. Hostellers in Cairns are hoping that this aspect of the industry will now be better understood by those in tourism-related industries across the State. The growth in the backpacker market is exponential.

It is expected that in the period from 1999 to 2000 we will experience a 25% increase in backpacker numbers. During 1999, 265,700 backpackers visited Queensland and stayed over 7 million nights at an average of 27 days. This brings the total of backpacker spending in Queensland for the year to \$466m. It is of interest to note that the main sectors of the backpacker market comprise people from the United Kingdom at 25%, people from Europe at 33% and people from North America at 15%. These figures are surely relevant to future marketing and promotional activities of Queensland tourism operators.

Of the destinations in Queensland visited by backpackers, Cairns and the far north have truly earned the title of capital city. In fact, 73% of backpackers who came to Queensland came to the far north. This compares with 54% who came to Brisbane, 45% to the Whitsundays and 44% to Fraser island.

The main point that QBITIA would like to make about the backpacker market is that it visits more regions and spends more locally per head than any other tourism sector. One of the reasons why this industry has not been recognised as such an important market in the past is that our international visitor numbers are so often collated from figures related to airport arrivals. Whilst many of our backpackers arrive in Sydney by air, they do not necessarily travel across Australia on international or domestic airlines. Frequently we find that backpackers travel by bus, car and rail. This has made the exercise of determining the number of backpackers in various areas very much harder. Additionally, we rely on figures about tourist accommodation occupancy and yet these are figures that are averaged across various kinds of tourism accommodation opportunities and they do not reflect, therefore, an entirely accurate picture when in fact our hostels in Cairns have had very high occupancy rates and their graph for accommodation occupancy would in fact increase much more steeply than the five star accommodation occupancy figures over these last several years.

All members of the House have an opportunity and I certainly join QBITIA in calling on Tourism Tropical North Queensland and Queensland Tourism to encourage the Federal Government to follow through on the tremendous initiatives of the former Minister for tourism, Michael Lee, in the previous Labor Government of the mid nineties. The then Federal Government had done some excellent work in producing wonderful guides such as the Backpacker Accommodation in Australia— A Ratings Guide and the Backpacker/Hostel Classification Assessment. These important documents have not been followed through by the present Federal Government, which is indeed a pity because these guides, if published nationally, would provide for backpackers from whatever countries—and even for our own backpackers—the best way to ensure that backpackers know that they are staying at registered hostels that meet the safety standards that Australia requires.

I join with QBITIA in recognising too the tremendous future of the backpacker industry. In Cairns we are particularly fortunate to have the old Palace picture theatre almost completed in its latest form as a backpacker hostel. I pay particular tribute to Ken Harris, the local developer, who has taken such trouble over the internal design as well as the external facade to keep the high profile of that important building on the Cairns streetscape. We have heard the news too that although the land on which Rusty's markets stand was sold several months ago, the markets will be retained and in their redevelopment not only will the markets survive but also there will be an adjacent new backpacker hostel.

This is very good business for Cairns. It is very good business for Queensland. It is exciting to host a market of young people, generally, who come from destinations around the world, who stay a long time in Queensland, who do spend their money in Queensland and who form friendships that hopefully will last a long time and lead to further visits.
