



Speech by
**Mrs NITA
CUNNINGHAM**

MEMBER FOR BUNDABERG

Hansard 18 July 2000

CHILDERS BACKPACKERS HOSTEL FIRE

Mrs NITA CUNNINGHAM (Bundaberg— ALP) (12.01 p.m.): I endorse the comments made earlier this morning by the Premier and the member for Burnett with regard to the recent fire disaster in Childers. As the member for the adjoining electorate of Bundaberg, I offer my most sincere sympathy to the families of the victims. I would like to place on record the outstanding work of countless people who worked tirelessly in Childers following the recent tragic fire in that town which caused the death of 15 young backpackers. I pay tribute to the way that they coped with the tragedy itself and with caring for the almost 70 survivors of the fire, most of whom had lost everything and suddenly found themselves in a foreign country with no passport, no credit cards, no contact phone numbers, no money, no clothes and nowhere to sleep or eat that night and who were in shock themselves, having just lost their close friends and travelling companions in a most sudden and horrific way.

It is not possible to name everyone who helped following this tragedy, but I pay tribute to the Mayor of Childers, Bill Trevor, a friend and former local government colleague of mine, who deserves the utmost praise for the way he worked to keep his community together and correctly address every issue as it arose locally, nationally and internationally at a time when he himself was in mourning for three of the young victims who had been working on his own farm. His councillors and staff also worked tirelessly and did a wonderful job, some having had no sleep for three days.

The Childers Fire Service did a remarkable job in containing the fire without major damage to adjacent shops while backup services came from other areas, such as my electorate of Bundaberg, to help with the massive job of securing the building and recovering the bodies—jobs that took up to three and four days to carry out. All emergency services—fire, ambulance, police and the SES—worked tirelessly and were a fine example of how well their services operate and how well the local government disaster action plan for Childers worked. To their credit, the Premier and the Minister for Emergency Services, Stephen Robertson, visited Childers as soon as possible and then returned to the town for the service on the Sunday night, along with the Governor-General, the Prime Minister, the Queensland Governor and Federal, State and local government representatives.

Service clubs, churches, and fruit and vegetable grower associations from Childers and from the Bundaberg district worked non-stop for days to provide food and accommodation to the survivors as well as to the hundreds of visitors and workers who were on the scene in Childers. Renowned community identities, such as Nancy Calder and Shirley Maizey, worked together with the Mayor and with hundreds of fine residents of the town of Childers to address problems and to organise the service that was held in that town on the Sunday night, which was a credit to everyone in Childers.

As in any major tragedy, there are some horrific stories, some extremely sad stories. Any parent who has had a son or daughter working or travelling overseas can feel for those parents who have lost their loved ones. But such a tragedy also brings out the very best in people, and it was quite remarkable how a tiny community such as Childers could come together, work together and cope so magnificently.

I would also like to make mention of the cooperation of people in the Premier's office, in particular Graeme Roberts-Thomson, whose assistance in getting the national flags of the countries of the backpackers to be hung on stage for the service in Childers was greatly appreciated. I rang Graham late on the Saturday afternoon with a request for 14 flags—the flags of England, Wales, North and

South Ireland, Scotland, Great Britain, Japan, New Zealand, Israel, South Korea, Canada, the Netherlands, India, and, of course, Australia. To his credit and with the help of other State departments, Graham was able to locate those flags, and they were brought to Childers the next morning for the service on the Sunday night.

The only flag they could not get was the Scottish flag, which I was able to borrow from the chieftain of the Caledonian Band in Bundaberg. Mr Ken McCracken was in western Queensland when I contacted him early on the Sunday morning. He arranged for his daughter to go and open his house, get the flag and deliver it to me in Bundaberg within an hour. This is a clear indication of the feeling that is rife within our communities and the desire of everyone to help wherever they can. Those flags went a long way towards fostering the desire of the people of Childers to make the surviving backpackers feel part of the community. I am sure that they were of enormous comfort to the survivors and to their families overseas and added significantly to the service.

Tragedies such as the one that occurred in Childers bring communities to their knees, but they also bring communities together as never before. I saw this myself in Childers on that terrible weekend. The community of Childers can be very proud of the way that they coped. Their community is now looking at the possibility of rebuilding this backpackers hostel. I am sure that, with their determination and with the help of State and Federal Governments, they will succeed in that project and their community will move forward into the future in a stronger and more committed way than ever before.
