



Speech by

**Mr S. ROBERTSON**

**MEMBER FOR SUNNYBANK**

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Hansard 19 July 2000

### **MINISTERIAL STATEMENT**

#### **Childers Backpackers Hostel Fire**

**Hon. S. ROBERTSON** (Sunnybank—ALP) (Minister for Emergency Services) (9.54 a.m.), by leave: As the international community continues to mourn the 15 backpackers who tragically lost their lives in the Childers fire last month, the Beattie Government is taking steps to minimise the risk of this tragedy happening again. Within 24 hours of the fire I established a high-level multi-agency task force to examine a wide range of legislative and regulatory issues arising from the Childers fire. That task force will make a preliminary report to me by 31 August.

I also ordered an immediate fire safety audit of all accommodation premises in Queensland catering to the backpacker market. Fire officers are in the process of inspecting all these premises to ensure they have fully operating fire protection systems, such as fire alarms, as well as fire evacuation plans and clearly marked emergency exits. To date, fire officers have inspected 356 premises offering accommodation to backpackers, including hostels, boarding houses, budget motels and hotels with backpacker accommodation.

Fire safety breaches have been identified in the vast majority of premises inspected. Thankfully, most of these breaches have been minor in nature and easily remedied. They have included defects such as flat or missing batteries in smoke alarms, out-of-date fire extinguishers, defective light bulbs in exit signs, no evacuation plans and inadequate maintenance of firefighting equipment. Other identified defects are more serious, including obvious overcrowding, inadequate maintenance of firefighting equipment, locked or blocked emergency exits and lack of fire alarm systems or systems that are not properly maintained. Proprietors at all of these establishments have been instructed to rectify these defects and will be subject to follow-up visits to ensure compliance.

When I announced these actions I said that I expected the cooperation of owners and managers of backpacking establishments throughout Queensland during this fire safety blitz. I indicated that I would name publicly any backpacking establishment that did not cooperate with firefighters during this period. I am pleased to say that, to date, fire officers have received the cooperation of the backpacking establishments they have inspected. I thank the backpacking industry for that level of cooperation. I hope it will continue in the months ahead.

The Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority is also in the process of producing fire safety brochures in a range of languages for distribution to guests in premises catering to backpackers to ensure that backpackers themselves can take appropriate action to protect their own personal safety. These immediate measures reflect the Beattie Government's commitment to taking decisive action to minimise the risk of this tragedy ever being repeated here in Queensland.

I join with the Premier in placing on record the Government's heartfelt thanks to those emergency services workers and volunteers who assisted the community during this very difficult time. The first auxiliary firefighters on the scene of the fire on that fateful morning had the dangerous task of rescuing backpackers from the burning hostel and controlling the blaze, while local ambulance officers treated the survivors. Over the following days, emergency services workers and SES volunteers from Childers and surrounding communities, such as Bundaberg, police and community workers rallied together to provide every assistance to the backpackers and local residents.

The Premier and I visited Childers twice in the days following the tragedy. While the feeling in the town was one of overwhelming grief, we were heartened and humbled by the professionalism and

skill of every single emergency services worker and volunteer we encountered. These men and women worked tirelessly to do everything they could for the community, from investigating the cause of the fire to guarding the privacy of the survivors. I join with the Premier, the member for Burnett and the member for Bundaberg in thanking all of those emergency services workers for their professionalism and their dedication to duty. I also thank the people of Childers for their commitment to their own community.

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