



Speech by

Mr S. ROBERTSON

MEMBER FOR SUNNYBANK

Hansard 23 August 2000

FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY AMENDMENT REGULATION [No. 1]

Hon. S. ROBERTSON (Sunnybank—ALP) (Minister for Emergency Services) (2.45 p.m.): It pains me to say this, but this disallowance motion is nothing more than a political stunt by the Opposition and a complete waste of this Parliament's time. It is all about the National and Liberal Parties trying to score cheap political points out of minor adjustments to urban fire levies in a handful of Queensland communities. It is about coalition guilt for driving the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority to the very brink of insolvency during the Borbidge/Sheldon reign of error. It is about the member for Mirani proving yet again his incompetence and failure to grasp even a basic understanding of the Emergency Services portfolio. I excuse the member for Mooloolah for his ignorance, but there is no excuse for the member for Mirani. However, I will have more to say about the member for Mirani later.

At issue here is an ongoing process by the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority to identify and correct levy anomalies that have existed for years in a small number of Queensland communities. There are 240 urban fire districts in Queensland. The levy adjustments in question affect just seven of those districts. They are Port Douglas, Noosa/Tewantin, Gympie, Maroochydore, Hervey Bay, Nambour and Kawana. These communities benefit from vastly improved local fire services, including more firefighters, new fire stations and more fire vehicles and equipment—two of which I handed over late last week—thanks to record funding by the Beattie Labor Government. However, residents in these communities currently pay less in fire levies than people in neighbouring communities who receive the same level of fire service.

For example, Kawana residents on the Sunshine Coast are serviced by not one but three fire stations based at Kawana, Maroochydore and Caloundra. While Kawana property owners contribute \$67 a year in fire levy payments for this service, their Maroochydore neighbours pay \$90.60 a year and Caloundra residents \$114.40 a year for exactly the same fire service. It is unfair. Even Blind Teddy can see that it is a matter of equity that these anomalies be removed so that everyone pays their fair share. These levy corrections bring about equity and fairness. They are justified. They will enable the QFRA to provide these communities with even better fire services.

The levy increases themselves are extremely modest. In five of the seven communities, the levy increases amount to just 46c extra a week—the cost of a postage stamp. Port Douglas residents will pay an extra 20c a week. Kawana residents will pay 91c extra per week, and that is cheaper than a weekend newspaper. Local government authorities do not oppose these levy adjustments, except of course one councillor on the Sunshine Coast, and I will come back to him in a minute. Neither has there been any demonstrable community resistance except for the 20 or so Kawana residents dragged along to a public meeting by the member for Mooloolah. Even they admitted at that meeting after it was explained to them—

Mr Schwarten: 20 people?

Mr ROBERTSON: Yes, 20 people, which is bigger than the Liberal Party branch up there. After it was explained to them, even those people admitted that the levy increases were fair after they realised exactly what kind of service they were getting. So what is all the fuss about? Why are members opposite wringing their hands in mock indignation? Why are they demanding Parliament reject what are very minor adjustments to a handful of fire levies? The answer is blatant political opportunism.

The member for Mirani and his coalition cohorts see an opportunity to create a bit of political mischief, to score cheap points, to confuse the community. Well, I have some bad news for those opposite. This cheap political stunt will backfire on them. It will blow up in their faces, because the member for Mirani has it wrong again. At least the member for Mooloolah had done some homework in relation to this and realised that three years ago, when the coalition was in office, the Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee looked at this question of fire levies throughout the State. Whilst the member for Mooloolah did in fact quote briefly from the recommendation, it comes down to the fact that the Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee called for a review of the fire levies, particularly targeting the Sunshine Coast based on a submission it had received. The misinterpretation of the member for Mooloolah is just a little dishonest—to say that "review" does not mean "increase"! Any objective analysis of the situation up on the Sunshine Coast proves that that levy adjustment must take place.

What is most galling about this is noting who sat on the Public Accounts Committee that actually accepted the recommendation in 1997 that Sunshine Coast fire levies be reviewed. It was the member for Mirani. A coalition dominated parliamentary committee brought down this recommendation, which we implemented, and the person who sat on that committee has come in here and moved this disallowance motion. There are only two conclusions to be reached. Either he is a hypocrite or he is stupid. They are the choices that are left. The member for Mirani sat on a parliamentary committee that brought down a recommendation which we implemented. He comes in here perhaps having forgotten that he sat on that parliamentary committee. I am prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt, because I think it is probably better to be proved stupid than politically opportunistic.

This whole thing has blown up in the face of the member for Mirani. He comes in here talking about a scandal, about extraordinary tax increases and about it being unreasonable, but he is the one who sat on that parliamentary committee. There is another point on which I could give the benefit of the doubt. Unfortunately the report of the Public Accounts Committee does not contain attendance records, but I am assuming the member actually did attend the meetings. Try as I might, I do not find any dissenting report from the member for Mirani, so presumably he did stick up his hand when the vote was counted in relation to reviewing fire levies on the Sunshine Coast. He has come in here and moved this motion of disallowance expecting this Parliament not to see through either his stupidity or his political opportunism.

Mr Schwarten: It could be both. He could be stupidly politically naive and opportunistic.

Mr ROBERTSON: I take the interjection. The member for Mirani did say nice things about me in the debate on the Appropriation Bills, so I will not be that cruel. But it is open to a finding. That is the crux of this debate. This is absolute political opportunism.

Let us look at the services provided on the Sunshine Coast. Those opposite would have us believe that Kawana residents do not receive the same level of fire service as do other residents on the Sunshine Coast. What absolute nonsense! My electorate of Sunnybank does not contain a fire station, and it is as big as the electorate of Mooloolah. Do the residents of Sunnybank pay a fire levy? Of course they do! Why? When there is a fire in Sunnybank, units are mobilised from the nearest stations—whether it be Rocklea, Acacia Ridge or Mount Gravatt—and they come into Sunnybank and put out the fire. That is exactly what happens in the electorate of Mooloolah.

Every time there is a structural fire or a suspected fire around Kawana, two things happen. A unit goes from Kawana and a unit goes from either Caloundra or Maroochydore. But they do not want to pay for it. In fact, that area gets a better fire service than my electorate gets, yet they do not want to pay for it. The member for Mirani should do more homework. He gave me the example of an incident that occurred on the Nicklin Way.

Mr Malone: Which happens regularly.

Mr ROBERTSON: Absolutely. I thought I would get my people to do some research into that particular incident because I was very concerned that the member might have actually got something right. Who attended the motor vehicle accident which blocked up the Nicklin Way? The member is right: the Kawana Fire Station mobilised. The call was received at 11.22 and the Kawana fire crew arrived there at 11.30—eight minutes later. Who was there one minute later? The crew from Maroochydore! There were actually two appliances attending that motor vehicle accident. The member should be counting himself lucky, but he does not want to pay for it.

This is the example the member for Mirani brings into this place to justify his argument not to pay full tote odds, as everyone else in that region does. One can only come to the conclusion that this is a political stunt. There can be no other conclusion. Every time there is a structural fire in Kawana, every time an alarm goes off at the Kawana Shopping Centre, what happens? The Kawana auxiliary fire crew and a permanent fire crew from either Caloundra or Maroochydore attend. The member acknowledges the additional staff, the additional appliances and the millions of dollars we are putting in to the Sunshine Coast through our Capital Works Program. He just does not want to pay for it.

I think the member for Mirani has been sold a pup. The member for Mooloolah actually did not get interested in this until one of his loosely called "mates" brought it up—that is, Councillor Champion. Champion of what I am not too sure. Despite the fact that the local authority itself agrees with the increases, he went out on his own for the big stunt. Why did the member for Mooloolah then get involved? Because Champion is a political rival of his! He once challenged him for preselection. The member for Mooloolah then gets all nervous, gets up on his hind legs and says, "Me, too. I am concerned about this." He was not concerned about it until a political rival of his within the Liberal Party stuck his head up and made an embarrassment out of him. That is the real story behind this. The member for Mooloolah has never told the member for Mirani that. He has sold him a pup. It is no wonder this coalition is in such a mess! It is no wonder it hangs by a thread. He was sold a pup by one of his Liberal mates. That is what has happened here yet again.

I actually had to listen to the member for Caloundra, the former Treasurer of this State, speak some absolute arrant nonsense. She was arguing that taxes or levies collected in a certain area should be put back into that area. Imagine what would happen if that principle were applied throughout the State. What if that were applied up in Sarina? Imagine if the tax base of Mirani was all that Mirani ever got out of the Government. The local member would be on the streets, along with us, decrying the Liberals for not understanding the need for an investment in the bush. Yet this is what the member for Caloundra, the former Treasurer of this State, was actually arguing. She talked about investing the taxes where they are collected. The member for Mirani does not believe that and I do not believe that, but she does. The Liberals certainly do. The coalition has real problems.

Mr Schwarten: She believes there is Government money—Government money and taxpayers' money. That is the problem.

Mr ROBERTSON: Yes, of course. Absolutely. This is the problem with the argument. We cannot operate that way. God help us if those opposite ever get back into power and apply that standard of raising taxes and only giving back to an area what is raised from it. If they did that, they could kiss their western seats goodbye. They could kiss their north Queensland seats goodbye and they could kiss the south-west goodbye. It is people in the coastal areas, the population areas, who actually raise the taxes that go out to the bush. We do not complain about it, but the former Treasurer of this State, Mrs Sheldon, certainly does.

This represents us finally getting the fire levy right. I may still be young, but I have lived forever. I actually remember when the fire levy was introduced in 1985. I remember what a God-awful botch-up was made. At that stage the budget for fire services was around \$98m. I remember then Minister Martin Tenni—someone we would like to forget, I might add—bringing in this new fire levy. The fire levy was to actually raise \$98m throughout the State. Well, the then Government got it wrong. It did not get it wrong by \$5m. It did not get it wrong by \$10m. It got it wrong by \$40m! Those opposite got it wrong by \$40m. What did they then have to do? In order that they did not put fire services into receivership, they then had to go to Treasury and borrow that \$40m at market interest rates. It was not until 1991, seven years later, that that debt was paid off. So every time the Government brought down a budget for fire services, a significant proportion of it had to go back to Treasury to pay the loan it had to take out because it botched the introduction of the fire levy. The former Government set back fire services in this State for decades, and why did it botch it up? Because it made political deals on fire levy boundaries. It had its mates on the fire brigade boards—

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms Nelson-Carr): Order! There is too much noise in the Chamber.

Mr ROBERTSON: It had its mates on the fire brigade boards, and it would sidle up to them and say, "Look, what is advantageous politically in terms of setting this boundary?" In Maryborough a fire boundary was set that cut the city in half along a railway line, because as it just so happened, certain members of the Maryborough Fire Brigade Board just happened to live on the other side. Of course, they as councillors could not be seen to be imposing a levy on their constituents. That occurred throughout the State.

We finally have a Government that is fixing up this levy system once and for all, a Government which will provide sustainable growth funding. Never shall we return to the days under the coalition of political deal-making in the setting of fire brigade levy districts. We will finally put fire services on a sustainable growth funding basis.

Mr Veivers interjected.

Mr ROBERTSON: I would be very, very quiet if I were the member for Southport. He really would not want me to start on him about the 135 firefighters he promised. "Yes, we will increase the number of firefighters in this State", except that the then Government could not afford it; it actually did not have any money. As a result, my good friend the member for Currumbin, the then Minister for Emergency Services, had to fix up the mess.

Mr Veivers interjected.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! That is very unparliamentary language. I ask the member for Southport to desist using it.

Mrs Rose interjected.

Mr ROBERTSON: As the former Minister reminds me, the coalition sent the Fire Service broke. The first chance it got to get back in control of the Fire Service, it sent it broke. Thank goodness for the former Minister for Emergency Services, because it was only through her hard work that we got back on track with a \$25m fire rescue package, and that work continues today through the proper setting of fire levy boundaries.

As I said, this is just gross political opportunism, gross hypocrisy on behalf of the member for Mirani. I cannot believe for one moment that he would have instigated this disallowance motion. He has been sold a pup by the Liberal Party to solve a little internal squall it has going in Mooloolah. The member for Mirani has not thought it through, and worst of all, he is proven guilty through political ignorance because he could not even remember that he sat on the Public Accounts Committee in 1997, a coalition parliamentary committee that actually recommended that these levies be increased, because it was recognised that there was inequitable levy raising, even though there was equity of service provision on the Sunshine Coast.
