



Speech by

**Mr S. ROBERTSON**

**MEMBER FOR SUNNYBANK**

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Hansard 15 November 2000

### **FUEL PRICES**

**Hon. S. ROBERTSON** (Sunnybank—ALP) (Minister for Emergency Services) (12.31 p.m.): I rise in support of the motion moved by the Premier. Can I just say before expressing my grave concern and alerting the House once again to the impact of rising fuel prices, particularly on volunteer emergency services, I make reference to the speech of the member for Tablelands. The member for Tablelands knows that since he has come into this place I have opposed just about everything he has ever said, but in due deference to him, I have to say what we just witnessed was perhaps one of the best speeches that I have witnessed in this place. It went to the very heart of this matter. To see the members like the member for Callide, the member for Gregory, the member for Hinchinbrook and others squirm as he went right to the heart of the problem of the impact of fuel prices in rural Queensland was a delight to watch. I will give him due credit for that, because he is quite right; the National Party did lose the plot. The fact that he is here today is proof that those opposite have in fact lost the plot. This is what this motion is in fact all about.

Look at my own portfolio of Emergency Services. I have risen in this place on numerous occasions expressing concern about the impact of rising fuel prices on volunteer emergency services—the rural fire brigades, the SES, the surf-lifesavers and others—85,000 volunteers across Queensland. What did we do? When we recognised the problem, we took action. What does the National Party want to do when it has been dragged into this debate embarrassed by its own ineptitude and impotence in relation to this issue? It wants to set up a royal commission. It does not want to deal with it straightaway. It says, "Let's book some more lawyers; let's throw plenty of money in to pay outrageously priced lawyers in a royal commission."

What we do is get on with the job. That is why last month I set up the rural fire task force to look at this particular problem of the impact of rising fuel prices on our rural fire brigades. Because, as members opposite would know—if they ever in fact go back out to their electorates—this year we have suffered one of the busiest bushfire seasons in our history. In one weekend alone just over a month ago we registered two and a half thousand fires in south-east Queensland alone. And who turns up to those fires? Our rural fire volunteers! And how do they get there? They have to take their trucks. What goes into the trucks to get them there? Fuel!

When I sent out a letter to our rural fire brigades telling them what this Government was doing to alleviate the stress that rising fuel prices had on them, I received this letter back from the Secretary/Treasurer of the Roadvale Rural Fire Brigade, from the electorate of Lockyer, I believe. It might just be instructive for the members opposite to listen to what a person in rural Queensland is saying about rising fuel prices. The letter states—

"Dear Sir,

Thank you for your letter dated 20th October highlighting your Government's concern at rising fuel costs & the financial & administrative burden of the GST. You mentioned that brigades who budgeted for fuel at 70-80c a litre are now paying over 90c a litre. Well, that was last week! The current price ... at the pumps in Boonah is \$1.025 a litre—and we use two litres just getting there to fill up.

Roadvale brigade budgets for 1000 litres of fuel to run its two appliances per year and the cost of that fuel has risen by \$225 since June. ... (During the recent fires, the trucks travelled approx. 1600 Km)."

In one month they exceeded by 50% what they usually budget for in a year. The letter continues—

"Rural brigades use fuel for other reasons than 'filling up the tank'. Drip torches ... in chainsaws as well as pump motors. The continuing rise in the cost of fuel is raising some concern & we look forward to the Queensland Government's initiatives to keep the costs to volunteer units down—as opposed to the auxiliary brigades who, I understand, don't pay the excise.

The impost of the GST on brigade administration is another matter & the closure of the Commonwealth Bank in Boonah hasn't helped. The meanness of the new tax system has been highlighted by the fact that all the information required by the ATO is accompanied by reply-paid envelopes. Now that we've reached the business end of the deal, the BAS comes with an envelope that requires a stamp.

Your initiative in sending your letter to me personally—as opposed to just addressing it to the Secretary—is appreciated & the brigade looks forward to your continuing involvement with us."

There it is, one of the real people who are out there doing it for Queensland as a volunteer of a rural fire brigade putting in one letter what this debate is really all about. It is about rising fuel prices, about the impact on our volunteers—our volunteers who turn out at every hour of the night or weekend to look after their own community and who are getting no relief from the Federal Government. Of course the only thing they do get from the Federal Government is this new tax system, which just adds to the paperwork and the burden on our volunteer groups. And, as the author of the letter says, at the business end of the deal after all the advertising has gone away they start sending stuff out and they cannot even shout a rural fire brigade the cost of a stamp. That is exactly how heartless this Howard Government is. That is why we are having this debate here today and that is why when we hear members like the member for Tablelands speak about the National Party forgetting where it has come from, it really hits home. I was sitting here and I was watching their faces. I was watching their jaws drop as they were thinking, "We have lost it. We cannot respond to what the member for Tablelands had to say."

I was reminded earlier on that the word of the week appears to be boondoggle. In fact, I was listening earlier this morning to the speech by the Liberal Leader and I was reflecting on the meaning of "boondoggle", which I understand is a small, insignificant piece of work. I thought: doesn't that sum up the Leader of the Liberal Party nicely? What a boondoggle! His presentation here today was absolutely pathetic. He was given an extension of time. At no time would he breach his own party solidarity to come clean with the people of Queensland and admit that Howard has got it wrong.

**Opposition members** interjected.

**Mr ROBERTSON:** I hear the interjections of those opposite. What asinine objections they are. When are they going to stand up in this place for the people they represent? I am wondering at this point in time where my opposite number is. It has been three weeks since he has asked me a question in this place. He cannot even ask me a question on notice each sitting day, but when we are having a discussion about the impact of fuel prices on rural fire brigades, where is he? Absolutely nowhere to be seen! Just like when the alternative Leader of the House called for a quorum, who was missing? Just about every member of the Opposition. Where was the Opposition's support for its own amendment? The reason we did not have a quorum was that no members opposite were here, just as we have the absent member for Mirani, who goes around trying to pick up whatever scraps he can of any little bit of scandal in Emergency Services. When will he come into this place and deal with substantive issues like the impact of fuel prices on rural fire brigades, on the SES, on lifesavers and on every other volunteer arm of my department? Frankly, he does not care.

Last month I set up my own rural task force to inquire into the impact of rising fuel prices and the GST on rural fire brigades. I did something that those opposite never did. I immediately ensured that every fire brigade in Queensland had access to the Queensland Government petrol card. Do honourable members know when that system was introduced? That system was introduced in 1984! This is the only Government that has ever gotten off its butt and put the application forms in front of the rural fire brigades so that they could obtain some immediate relief. It sounded like a good stunt when those opposite brought it in, but they did absolutely nothing about it. This is an example of the type of practical help that this Government undertakes to give.

My rural fire task force is reporting to me this Friday. The task force will supply me with a list of recommendations on how we can provide further practical assistance to rural fire brigades. That is what

being in Government is all about. That is what getting on with the job is all about. What is the Opposition's solution—setting up a royal commission. Great! Fantastic!

Those opposite sit there mute and absurd because they know that this Government gets on with the job. We give practical assistance at the time when organisations are hurting most. All those opposite want to do is set up a royal commission and hire expensive lawyers. A royal commission would probably report in six months or a year. Meanwhile, rural fire brigades and SES units under the Opposition's stewardship would be closing. The gulf between this Government and those opposite is immense.

Each and every member opposite was nailed by the member for Tablelands. I look forward to seeing the reception that honourable members opposite receive when they visit the tablelands, because the 35,000 farmers will probably be joined by the 85,000 emergency service volunteers in this State. These people know that the Opposition did nothing. As evidence of that, the coalition introduced a fuel card subsidy for emergency service groups in 1984, and what did I find when I became Minister? No-one had ever applied for it! Those opposite stand condemned by their own inaction, and that is why this motion should be supported by every single member in this place.

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