



Speech by

Mr T. MALONE

MEMBER FOR MIRANI

Hansard 22 August 2000

FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY AMENDMENT REGULATION (No. 1)

Mr MALONE (Mirani—NPA) (12.30 p.m.): I move—

"That the Fire and Rescue Authority Amendment Regulation (No. 1) 2000, Subordinate Legislation No. 113 of 2000, tabled in the House on 20 June 2000 be disallowed."

In moving that this regulation be disallowed, I stress from the outset that I am not adopting an obstructionist stance simply for the sake of being obstructive. The decision by this Government to reclassify certain areas in the State under sections of the Fire and Rescue Authority Act 1990 was made simply by drawing lines on a map. No consideration of fairness has occurred, no logical thought patterns have been followed and there is no semblance of justice; it is a decision based on lines on a map.

It is interesting that the Scrutiny of Legislation Committee in its report on this regulation is of the opinion that section 43 of the Statutory Instruments Act 2000 technically required that a regulatory impact statement should have been prepared in relation to this amended regulation. No statement was prepared. However, I am not here to argue technicalities; I am here to try to get values of fairness and justice applied to Government decision making.

This Government has used half-truths, questionable data and confused statistics to gloss over the real impact of this amendment. The Minister for Emergency Services has given guarantees that in the replacement Schedule 2 no substantive changes to the 16 fire levy groups or the descriptions of properties listed in these groups has taken place. He guarantees that in the eight districts where an increase has occurred he has kept that increase at 2.2% or less consistent with CPI. The last increase occurred in July 1999.

However, there has certainly been a huge discrepancy in Schedule 1. In that Schedule, of the approximately 200 fire districts listed, eight have increased, seven have decreased and the remainder have remained the same. So the overall effect is that there have only been approximately eight increases. Overall, there is not a great deal of difference to the schedule.

In regard to the individual areas where the increased levy was imposed, I am particularly referring in this disallowance motion to the area of Kawana, where the base rate for suburban houses has risen by \$47.40. That increase is very much above the CPI. Indeed, it is approximately 70% above the CPI. Therefore, it is absolutely extraordinary that in his letter of 10 July 2000 to the Scrutiny of Legislation Committee the Minister misled that committee by stating that the total increase across all the fire levies was 1.3%. That is fair, but the Minister failed to point out that in one area there was an increase of 70%. In actual fact, the levy has increased in only eight of the 200 fire districts, but a couple of these areas have increased by very significant amounts. The Kawana area is the one that I am concerned about.

The Minister cleverly stated that, while the burden of the overall percentage increase was borne by very few, the total cost to the community was in the vicinity of \$2.35m. This figure was reached by a careful selection of sections of the community footing the Bill. I should imagine that people in these areas will be very pleased to know that they can contribute very substantially to a figure that is below CPI costs throughout the State. I am sure that if the Minister had communicated in a truly consultative manner he would have known long before this regulation was tabled in the House that there would be

some very angry people in those districts, and particularly Kawana, that have borne the brunt of this increase.

In relation to the consultative process, the Minister States in his letter to the Scrutiny of Legislation Committee—

"In all districts where a change of urban fire levy class has occurred, there has been extensive consultation with mayors, chief executives and local members of Parliament."

I believe that the Minister seriously misled the committee in respect of the level of consultation that took place. I question the level of consultation that occurred with members of Parliament, mayors and chief executives.

Mr Robertson: What evidence do you have? Give me some specific examples.

Mr MALONE: I can read some letters to the House if the Minister requires that, but I do not know that we need to go into that. I understand from members on my side of the House that the consultation that took place was virtually an up-front indication of what was going to happen. It was very much a case of, "Take it or leave it." The consultation was very superficial, to say the least. As I understand it, a lot of the consultation and communication that took place occurred at the instigation of members of this House or the QFRA rather than at the instigation of the Minister.

The intention of this Government to impose a massive annual fire levy increase of almost half a million dollars on the ratepayers in the Kawana area of the Sunshine Coast is indeed a scandal. It is revenue raising by stealth. It is scandalous because the increases bring no added benefits, no extra services and not even a hint of value for money to those ratepayers. There is an old saying: "Keep smiling and no-one will ever know what you are thinking." This seems to be the trademark method of operation of the Beattie Labor Government. Indeed, we know about that leaked memorandum in respect of the Budget. This is a Government that smiles while it wields the financial sword and the financial knife.

The new Minister for Emergency Services may be an apprentice when it comes to sporting the Beattie grin, but he is fast becoming known as the smiling assassin of the Sunshine Coast. He is imposing on the people of Kawana a fire levy impost created by the stroke of a pen, a change of classification of a fire area for protection purposes. Of the more than 200 fire districts in Queensland, Kawana is the only one that is moving from class C to class A. That means that those ratepayers will now be paying a class A levy. That translates to approximately a 70% increase in the levy over that period.

I have here a letter written by the centre manager of Kawana Shoppingworld, Steve Bannister-Tyrrell, to Wayne Hartley—

"Representing as we do, not only the Landlord but three major retail tenants along with 87 small speciality shop retailers, we are vitally concerned at the dramatic impact that a potential increase approaching \$21,000 over and above the 1999/2000 charges will have on all of these businesses within Kawana Shoppingworld."

These changes create a real concern for these people who have to pay this increased fire levy.

Mr Robertson: The same levy that everyone else has to pay.

Mr MALONE: I agree with the Minister, but the problem is the huge increase in one area that I believe is unsubstantiated. However, the service remains the same and, as time goes by and the region continues to develop quickly, the ratepayers will be paying more and more and getting less and less. Classifications of urban fire districts under schedule 1 range from class A to class D. An area with a high level of fire services available gets a higher rating. As I said previously, Kawana has jumped from a class C to a class A on the basis that the surrounding fire services have been upgraded. Obviously, the Minister will say that the fire services at Caloundra and Maroochydore have been upgraded. I accept that. However, the auxiliary station at Kawana has received no major upgrades.

Mr Robertson: It depends. If a shopping centre caught on fire—

Mr MALONE: The Minister can have his shot later.

Mr Robertson interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Mickel): The Minister will cease interjecting.

Mr MALONE: Mr Deputy Speaker, thank you very much for your protection.

I turn to schedule 2, which states that, in terms of fire levy group 2—farming and grazing with buildings and farmhouses—the class C levy is \$67. That levy will now rise to \$114, which is an increase of 70%. In relation to the shopping centre classification, which covers offices, shops and commercial recreation premises—the sort of thing that we would find in a town such as Kawana—a class C levy is \$2,454. That levy will now rise to \$4,093. A drive-in shopping centre pays a class C levy of roughly \$32,000. That levy will rise to \$53,000. The Minister would have to agree that they are very, very substantial levy increases.

The ratepayers of Kawana would be willing to pay more if they knew that their properties and their lives would enjoy better protection. However, that is not necessarily the case. I refer to the situation of the Nicklin Way. Obviously, if there is a fire or a disaster at Kawana, fire vehicles would have to come from Caloundra or Maroochydore along the Nicklin Way, which from time to time can become gridlocked. No matter how much infrastructure is put into Caloundra or Maroochydore, those fire trucks will still have to travel along the Nicklin Way to get to Kawana. I table an article in the South Coast Daily of 4 June, which states—

"The central Sunshine Coast's most hated road, the Nicklin Way, ground to a halt yesterday as traffic became gridlocked around the scene of two accidents.

. . .

Traffic banked up for kilometres in both directions after five cars collided before 1pm."

I understand that that happens on a regular basis. So no matter what happens, at the end of the day the people of Kawana will still have to rely on their auxiliary station, which is doing a great job.

I understand that the Minister may refer to increased spending. However, that increased spending has focused on Caloundra. Obviously, that is a heart-warming story for those people as the Minister goes out to see them and smiles and carries on but, at the end of the day, the bedtime story will give the ratepayers of Kawana a nightmare. They have seen right through the rhetoric that has been dished up to them so far. The brutality of this swift and painful financial operation is emphasised by the utter contempt that the Government has shown for the ratepayers of Kawana. It must be borne in mind that this severing of the hip-pocket nerve was done by the so-called caring Beattie Government—the Government that consults, reasons, shares and listens. In this instance, there was no consultation, there was no listening to reason, there was no sharing of information, and the voices of the people were not heard.

It is unfortunate that from time to time we see the imposition of unnecessary and extraordinary taxes on people who are just trying to get on with their lives. The problem that is being experienced by the people of Kawana exists in other areas throughout the State. However, my argument relates particularly to the impact that the increased fire levy has had on the people of Kawana. I have no argument in respect of the other fire levies that apply throughout the rest of the State. I think that the Minister should understand the complexities and the issues relating to the circumstances that exist in Kawana particularly. The Nicklin Way is a specific area about which the Opposition is worried. I understand—and I agree with this—that extra resources have been put into fire services at Caloundra and Maroochydore. However, at the end of the day, the problem is the extreme jump from the class C levy to the class A levy for the people of Kawana. I think that is unreasonable. I would be happy to listen to the Minister's explanation for that change in classification. Hopefully, the Minister's explanation can satisfy the residents of Kawana.
