



Speech by

**WARREN PITT**

**MEMBER FOR MULGRAVE**

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Hansard 22 August 2000

**FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY AMENDMENT REGULATION [No. 1]**

**Mr PITT** (Mulgrave—ALP) (12.54 p.m.): This disallowance motion brings back memories of the Opposition's attempts 14 months ago to scuttle the Government's rescue package for the Fire Service. They stood on that side of the House and openly criticised us for turning around the disastrous financial mess in which they left the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority. Let me refresh the memories of those opposite about how this Government solved their appalling mismanagement of the Fire Service.

At the time, the Leader of the Opposition and his Emergency Services spokesman went to great pains to claim they left the QFRA Trust Fund in the black. It seems they were so embarrassed by the appalling way they had managed the trust fund that they kept clinging to an unbelievable claim that the \$18m they left was enough to run the QFRA. This was despite the fact that they were well aware that it costs more than \$200m annually to run the Fire Service.

The need for an increase in funding was first identified by the Staib review in 1996. But the Borbidge Government chose to ignore the crisis, relegating it to the too-hard basket. Then the Fire Service took on the additional responsibility of rescue work but was not given a cent of additional funding in order to carry out this life-saving work. A second review in 1997, the Masters Review, was again ignored. That was despite the fact that it warned that urgent action—I repeat: urgent action—was needed to stop the Fire Service plunging into the red. The alarm bells were ringing loudly and clearly, but the previous Government preferred to shut their ears rather than address the problem. They simply crossed their fingers and hoped it would go away. It did not.

As soon as this Government came in, the then Minister for Emergency Services, concerned about the QFRA's financial state, commissioned an independent financial audit of the trust fund. Respected auditors PricewaterhouseCoopers found a financial crisis that would have left the QFRA floundering in a sea of debt. The review mirrored the two earlier reports commissioned—and subsequently ignored—by the former Government. It revealed that the former Minister and former Government were acutely aware of the problem from the start. They were complicit in letting the Fire Service plunge into the red.

When we came into Government, the Opposition then had the audacity to criticise us for coming up with a plan to solve the long-term funding needs of the Fire Service and ensure the protection of Queensland communities. After considering a range of options to boost the level of funding, this Government opted for a 27c a week levy increase—less than the cost of a local phone call or a postage stamp. The increase has allowed a \$25.5m annual injection of additional funds into the QFRA. Every cent is being poured into improving fire services to Queensland communities.

Recently, I was pleased to announce the delivery of a new fire truck to the Cairns South Fire Station. It was one of 56 state-of-the-art urban fire trucks delivered to stations throughout the State last year, representing a \$16m boost to the Fire Service fleet. In March this year it gave me great pleasure to attend the graduation of 12 new auxiliary firefighters for the Innisfail Fire Station, taking the total number of auxiliaries at Innisfail to 26 and ensuring the highest level of safety for the Innisfail community. This major boost to the auxiliary ranks in Innisfail has also allowed local permanent fire staff to deliver a more effective service to the community through fire prevention and public safety programs.

If those opposite were still in power they would have been forced to sack firefighters, close fire stations and compromise on equipment and training. Under this Government, the QFRA has never

been healthier. This Government's financial rescue package has ensured that an improved standard of fire cover is being delivered to communities right across Queensland and the QFRA is properly funded into the 21st century.

We have seen record budgets over the past two years, a record number of rural and urban fire vehicles delivered around the State, construction started on a more than \$12.6m world-class fire training facility and a significant boost to firefighter morale. A number of highly successful fire safety, education and prevention programs have been expanded. In fact, last year saw a record \$19m spent on community safety alone. Queenslanders are now safer in their homes and our firefighters are safer at work.

For the first time the full range of rescue services is being appropriately funded. Firefighters are better trained and better resourced to respond to road accidents, building collapses and swift water rescues, as well as manage chemical spills and incidents involving toxic materials. The funding injection has allowed the QFRA to significantly boost its ability to protect Queensland communities in fires, rescues and other emergencies. Earlier this year, we saw first-hand just how highly skilled and professional far-north Queensland firefighters are when the Innisfail community experienced its biggest fire in more than a decade. The massive blaze destroyed four buildings but had the potential to do a great deal more damage. Thanks to the remarkable efforts of firefighters from Innisfail, Gordonvale, Babinda and El Arish the fire was under control in six hours and damage was kept to a minimum. It was a stark reminder of the importance of having a highly effective and responsive, as well as appropriately resourced, Fire Service.

Just like the fire levy reclassification members opposite are objecting to today, the revamped fire and rescue levy introduced by the Beattie Labor Government was transparent. Even those opposite could see where the money was going—back into our fire services, back into protecting Queenslanders in communities across the State and back into protecting our firefighters. It was a responsible decision—just as responsible as reclassifying fire levies to ensure property owners pay appropriately for the level of Fire and Rescue Services they receive.

This Government has been prepared to make the tough decisions. The community and the Fire Service have been the major beneficiaries. Yet the Opposition continues to attack us for things they failed to do when in Government. If they were still in Government now, our Fire and Rescue Service would be in a disgraceful state. Firefighters would have lost their jobs, training and equipment would have been compromised, the vehicle replacement would have been stalled and fire stations would have been shut down. This Government refuses to let that happen. We will continue to ensure that Queenslanders receive a world-class Fire Service and that firefighters are given the equipment and training they need to carry out their life-saving role.

This amendment adjusts levies in a fair and equitable manner. Not only do some levy contributions go up, some also decrease. In fact, I am extremely pleased to note that both the Babinda Sugar Mill and the Mossman Sugar Mill will each benefit from a \$5,000 levy decrease. This is great news for both of these important businesses, which are major employers in my area. This motion denies them the right to pay the levy contribution they should be paying—no less and definitely no more. It is a sham and should be rejected.

Sitting suspended from 1.01 p.m. to 2.30 p.m.

**Mr MUSGROVE** (Springwood—ALP) (2.30 p.m.): This disallowance motion is an absolute disgrace and only highlights the fumbling incompetence of the Opposition spokesperson for Emergency Services in this place. It is a well-known fact that the all-party Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee reviewed the fire levy system and accepted its logic. This motion is an attack on that all-party committee and attempts to force some of the most struggling areas of our great State to subsidise some of the most affluent areas in the provision of fire services. In its report No. 41, the Public Accounts Committee stated—

"Kawana, Maroochy and Caloundra shared similar population density but were charged with dissimilar levies"—

and recommended that—

"... the Minister direct the authority to review classes allocated to urban districts and implement mechanisms to ensure continued equity ..."

The proposed amendments to the schedule will ensure that the levy contributed is linked to the level of service provided and that equity is maintained within the fire levy classification system. Areas on the north coast, as mentioned by the Public Accounts Committee, will contribute the same rate. Kawana, represented in this place by the member for Mooloolah, and Maroochy, represented by the member for Maroochy, will cease to contribute a lesser levy than Caloundra. I hope that the member for Caloundra would support that, because the good people of Caloundra are subsidising fire services in the electorates represented by the member for Mooloolah and the member for

Maroochydhore. I implore the member for Caloundra to represent her electorate and vote against this motion, which would see this inequitable system remain in place.

This reclassification will remove the ridiculous situation in which, for example, residents in Inala, Riverview, Morayfield, Clontarf and similar disadvantaged areas are paying more than landowners in Noosa or Peregrine Beach, who receive an identical level of service. I know that the member for Inala and the member for Kallangur will stand up for their constituents and vote against the inequitable system supported by those opposite. I know that the member for Noosa will support the current inequitable system because his constituents benefit from it. I would hope that the member for Ipswich West, who represents Riverview in this place, will not sell out his own electorate and ask them to continue to subsidise people living in Noosa.

Importantly, the proposed changes to the schedule would also reduce the financial burden on rural and regional landowners in economically depressed areas such as Cunnamulla and Wyandra, represented by the member for Warrego; Murgon, represented by the member for Barambah; the economically affected sugar growing areas of Babinda, represented by the member for Mulgrave; and Mossman, represented by the member for Cook. For example, premises such as the Murgon meatworks would benefit with a decrease in levy from \$27,400 to \$22,800, a very significant sum to a struggling employer. If the honourable member for Barambah supports this disallowance motion, then she will be supporting a \$4,600 kick in the guts to the Murgon meatworks and will be asking them to continue to subsidise folk living in Noosa and Peregrine Beach. The Babinda sugarmill and the Mosman sugarmill also each receive a benefit of a \$5,000 levy decrease, which I am sure the member for Cook and the member for Mulgrave will welcome.

I call on the members for Caloundra, Ipswich West, Warrego and Barambah to vote against this disallowance motion, because to support it would be a kick in the guts to the communities which they have been elected to represent here in this place. Indeed, as my learned colleague the member for Lytton has pointed out recently, the members for Barambah and Ipswich West vote against the Beattie Government 95% of the time. I would respectfully suggest to those members that they would do well to stop grovelling to the National Party and support this Government and their own electorates and vote against this inequitable disallowance motion.

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