



Speech by

Mr JIM PEARCE

MEMBER FOR FITZROY

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NATURAL RESOURCES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr PEARCE (Fitzroy—ALP) (6.08 p.m.): I am pleased to join the debate on the Natural Resources Legislation Amendment Bill. I will refer in particular to the impact of the downsizing of the Queensland Mines Rescue Service and the structure of the board. I support that part of the bill which amends the Coal Mining Safety and Health Act, because there is a requirement to insert a transition provision to ensure mines rescue services previously accredited under the Coal Mining Act 1925 continue to have accreditation until accreditation is in place under the Coal Mining Safety and Health Act 1999. Without the amendment, there is concern as to whether accreditation under the 1925 act carries forward as accreditation under the 1999 act. It was also realised that without the appropriate accreditation operating mining companies are possibly in breach of the act.

In speaking about the Queensland Mines Rescue Service I will probably upset a few people. If I do, that is unfortunate. Before anyone starts knocking on my door asking me to please explain, I remind the House and honourable members of the Moura No. 2 disaster. On 7 August 1994, at 25 minutes to midnight, there was an explosion in the Moura No. 2 mine and 11 miners died. Ten other workers in the mine at the time of the explosion escaped and are lucky to be alive. As a former coalminer, I felt a lot of pain from that disaster. Coalminers have a special bond, and it was a sad occasion for us. The emotional impact that had on the families of the Moura community and coal industry workers is one that I do not wish to experience again. In July 1986, 12 miners died at the Moura No. 4 mine. Nine years earlier, at the nearby Kianga on 20 September 1975, 13 miners died.

I have concerns about the direction of the coal industry and I have made a decision that when things have to be said about the potential risk to mineworkers—my friends, my brothers—I intend to stand in this place and put my concerns on the public record. The safety of miners is more important to me than the protocols that allow for mining companies and the bureaucracy to walk away from what should be an obligation to mineworkers and to the government of the day.

Mines rescue brigade members are trained under suitable conditions to save lives, without normally risking their lives or the lives of others, at a mine where an incident has occurred. They can also be used to save a mine or part of a mine by working to reventilate or stabilise parts of the mine following an incident.

Following the passage of the Coal Legislation Amendment Act 1997, the coal industry and mine operators became responsible for the provision of mines rescue services from 1 January 1998. Industry formed the private company Queensland Mines Rescue Service Limited, effective from 1 January 1998. Under the Coal Mining Act 1925, QMRS was approved as an accredited company to provide such services to the coal industry. The Queensland Mines Rescue Service mission statement states—

To provide a cost-effective mines rescue service, in partnership with the mining fraternity, which meets the needs of the mining industry primarily in dealing with and preventing mine emergencies involving irrespirable atmospheric conditions.

Prior to January 1998 there were three rescue brigades and committees of management. In 1989 the then minister, at the request of the QMRS, abolished the boundaries dividing the state into three localities to create a single rescue brigade with one committee of management to oversee it. The QMRS Limited structure now sits this way: board of directors, management committee, and Mines Rescue Service. There are number of offshoots from that.

The board of directors consists of four directors: three nominated by the QMRS funding bodies—that is, the Department of Mines, the Queensland Mining Council and the Workers

Compensation Board—with the fourth selected from three nominees, selected by 'ballot of mines rescue members'.

The concern I have is with the board of management continuing to downsize mines rescue services in Queensland. In doing so it is ignoring its own Vision 2000 strategic plan for the future of the Queensland mines rescue brigade. This plan was launched in November 1996. Recommendation 6 states—

Present manning is considered to be insufficient to meet the industry needs for an effective rescue service.

Rescue station manning should be reviewed to allow for the effective maintenance of training and equipment for core services.

That means having in place the right staff, appropriately resourced, so that they can effectively maintain their training and the equipment used in the services they provide.

Since the launch of the strategic plan we have seen the closure of the Collinsville and Moura rescue stations. Also, the number of people employed to provide training has been cut from seven to four. As if that is not bad enough, the board is currently considering the closure of Blackwater rescue station. I strongly object to the proposed closure. I make my point very clearly here tonight. I object, as do a number of people in the coal industry who are aware of the proposal.

Mines Rescue is the only expertly trained resource of skilled personnel capable of working in inhospitable or toxic mine atmospheres. While there are many people within the Department of Mines and within the management structure of mining companies who will argue against the need to maintain a mines rescue structure, the realities of life are that we must maintain a well-trained, well-resourced mines rescue capability. The day will come when this service will play a major role in bringing mineworkers back to the surface after a major incident. Honourable members can imagine the outcry there would be if an incident occurred and we did not have a Mines Rescue Service in place, in the appropriate location, to actually go into the mine and help bring those people out. We cannot move down this path of downsizing our Mines Rescue Service.

In a briefing note to me at the time of the privatisation of the Queensland Mines Rescue Service the then Minister for Mines advised—

Any changes would take into account the importance of maintaining or where possible improving the efficiency and performance of the brigade.

The then minister meant well, but, in the hands of a board with a focus on the bottom line of their budget, changes will be implemented that can impact on the performance of the service at the grassroots level. With a mining inspectorate that can almost be described as inert, the mining industry is slowly but surely heading for another major disaster. Of course, every member in this place would pray that that will never happen.

As I have said, a mine disaster has an overwhelming impact on the community and we are all saddened by the loss of life—the loss of husbands, fathers and brothers. The media, the public and the mines inspectorate will all call for changes so that it will never happen again. I have been in this place when it has happened. Politicians will stand in this place and express sympathy and call for inquiries that we all know take forever to conclude.

Tony McGrady had the courage to implement fully the subsequent recommendations following the Moura No. 2 explosion, but outcomes can be realised only if we have a bureaucracy determined to pursue mining companies to ensure that the highest possible standards are maintained. The Mines Department has a moral obligation to watch over the performance of the QMRS. But how can the workers in the coal industry rely on the Mines Department to ensure that we have in place an efficient, effective mines rescue capability when high-ranking bureaucrats are talking down the capacities of the service, saying things such as that mines rescue has never saved anyone. Coal owners have been quick to endorse those comments, saying things such as that mines rescue has never gone underground to save anyone. The reason for this is that in all recent disasters the mine owners have blown the mine up so badly that it is impossible for the mines rescue team to enter safely. This is akin to blaming the rescue teams for not saving more lives from the building blown up by the Oklahoma bomber.

I have copies of the minutes of a meeting held in March 1994 at which a high-ranking person from within the mining inspectorate, who was promoting the closure of the Moura rescue station, said that Moura was a low-risk area. And five months later we lost 11 men. A low-risk area! What was he thinking?

What the mining companies and the bureaucrats fail to realise or even acknowledge is that training provided by mines rescue has saved many lives. Honourable members could ask the crew that escaped from the mine after the Moura No. 2 disaster. They would agree to a man that the deputy, Len Graham, got them out and that it was his rescue training that allowed him to take charge and lead them to safety.

I am informed that a discussion paper has been called for and presented to the board of directors. The purpose of the discussion paper would appear to be the consideration of options relative to the future of the Blackwater rescue station. The discussion paper outlines three options for the Blackwater station: firstly, leave the station as it is and extend the training boundary to include the Oaky Creek mines; secondly, downsize the station by one permanent employee and move him to Dysart; and, thirdly, close Blackwater and move to Dysart but do not sell the assets. I am told that the board has agreed to the third option.

The discussion paper, with recommendations, was prepared and presented without consultation with the management of the Cook colliery or Kestrel, which is currently part of the Blackwater group serviced by the Blackwater station. And while I cannot confirm it at this time, I believe that not even the staff of the Blackwater station were consulted.

While the closure of Booval and Moura could be said to have been warranted at the time, in my view the Collinsville station should never have been closed, as the Newlands and North Goonyella mines could have been serviced from Collinsville a lot more effectively than they are now, because Newlands is 80 kilometres from Collinsville and 300 kilometres from Dysart. This is commonsense stuff.

When teams from Newlands train at Dysart, 300 kilometres away, they have to travel two and a half hours from Glenden before they can start and two and a half hours back after they finish. This is hardly conducive to quality training. Apparently this is not seen as a concern, because when the Blackwater station is closed the teams from Crinum and Kestrel will all have two hours travel in each direction, and Cook a three-hour drive in each direction, when they train at the rescue station in Dysart. This, to me, indicates that the board and the CEO are not concerned about the quality of the training and want only to be able to demonstrate that it is being done and at the minimum cost. If we centralise Dysart as a rescue station, we cannot effectively service the coal industry with rescue training, rescue response and rescue equipment maintenance.

I get really involved in this issue. And because I am so close to people in the industry, I think I am still there at times, so maybe I use the wrong terminology. But it is important that I get the message across.

The board of the Mines Rescue Service would have everybody believe that everything is okay—just as the HIH board did—and that the move is in the best interests of the mines. The best figure that I believe they can come up with to justify the closure of the Blackwater mine is a saving of some \$16,000 a year. If that is not penny pinching, what is?

Centralisation may be okay in some industries where they have all their interests within close proximity, but it is not suited to the QMRS, as response time is critical to the outcome of a rescue. Queensland is too big and the coalfields too large to provide an adequate, timely response from one central location. If an emergency occurred at the Cook colliery, there would be a five-hour response time from Dysart. The current response time is something like 30 minutes. This is just not in the best interests of the people who are working in the industry.

It has been suggested that if the police took several hours to respond to a car accident there would be a public outcry. Mines rescue response can be more likened to ambulance response, and there would definitely be a public outcry if an ambulance took five hours to respond to an accident. Are mineworkers any less deserving of a timely response than the general public? Can a five-hour response time for emergency assistance be seen as being in the best interests of the industry, or does the Cook colliery not count because it is not with BHP?

Another issue is the structure of the board of directors. As from February 2002, when BHP closes Kenmare, the board of directors will comprise two open-cut operators, one members' representative and one underground operator. The question that must be answered is: will the undergrounds be fairly represented on the board of directors after February 2002?

Also, I question the right of the current chairman of the board to be in that position. The chairman is a contractor working for BHP. The structure—set up and approved under the former minister—does not provide for a contractor to be appointed to the board, and a decision to close the Blackwater station should not be based on bottom-line dollars rather than what is most appropriate for the coal industry. How can the people working in the underground mines and the members of the Mines Rescue Brigade get fair representation on a board that makes decisions if the numbers are balanced in favour of the mining companies?

What I would like to see happen out of this is a group comprising QMRS permanent staff—probably one person; one of the underground operators—and I am not too worried about what mine that would be; one union official—that is, a person from the CFMEU; one Department of Mines representative; and the underground representative on the board. I would like to see them have a charter that would go something like this: look at the future direction of the QMRS; look at the structure of the board of directors and legislation concerning QMRS; and make recommendations to ensure that the changes that they recommend are adopted.

I know that I get a little bit worked up during these types of debates, but I have worked in the coal industry and I have benefited by being able to stand in this place today as a result of the experience and knowledge of a mines rescue trained member, whom I have no doubt saved my life in an incident in a mine. I am very, very thankful for the expertise and training that that member had on that particular night, and I will not, as a former member of the coal industry—a former employee, both underground and open-cut—and now as an elected representative of the coalminers of central Queensland, stand idly by and allow cuts to services that are going to impact on the ability of the Mines Rescue Service to deliver an efficient service to a mine site in the event of an emergency. This is too important to the industry, and I implore all those members who have any interest at all in this matter to take a very, very serious look at what is happening out there, because we cannot justify cutting dollars just so that our bottom line is right, thereby putting at risk the lives of mineworkers and the potential loss of mines in an area.

Lives—we cannot put a price on them. Mines—we can always build another one. But they cost millions and millions of dollars if they blow up and are a loss to the industry. I will state again that I am not prepared to stand here, representing those people and knowing that this is going to happen without putting up some sort of a fight.
