



Speech by

Mrs J. SHELDON

MEMBER FOR CALOUNDRA

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EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mrs SHELDON (Caloundra—Lib) (5.54 p.m.): I would like to contribute to this amendment bill and say briefly that it removes the statutory authority status of both the QAS and the QFRA, which were established as statutory authorities in 1997 by the coalition government. There was a real reason for that. They were established after an inquiry into the operations of both the QAS and the QFRA, which recommended the formation of those authorities and boards. The boards were subsequently abolished by the Beattie Labor government.

The authorities were put there for a reason; they were not just window-dressing. The report identified inefficiencies in both the QAS and the QFRA. These had been widely spoken of. The idea of setting up these statutory authorities was for the daily operations to be taken away from the bureaucratic process, which by its very nature and size becomes cumbersome, often inefficient and word does not get back to the coalface nearly as quickly as it should. They were also put in place to accentuate the fact that there needed to be a good level of accountability. That is currently present in the services. I believe that both of those services, the QAS and the QFRA, are excellent.

However, when control is taken away from the service, I believe that responsibility is also taken away. As the old adage goes, why fix it when it is not broken? I really cannot understand why the minister is doing this. It is all very well to say that this is going to save money. However, I have never yet seen any initiative such as this that, by and large, saves the government money, because money is spent in other areas. We cannot get away from the fact that operations have to be undertaken. Having spoken to a number of personnel in both of these services, I know that they are very concerned about going back under the complete umbrella of the department—although there was always a level of control—and away from that independent authority. They fear that they are going to lose their independence. They fear that all of these services will be covered by one big department, and there is no doubt that that has been a problem in the past. Those personnel just wonder why this is occurring. I really do not think that the old red herring that this is going to save money really convinces them any more than it convinces us.

So we really have to wonder why this is being done. The minister might like to explain what he is hoping to achieve by implementing this legislation. Is it just to change something that the coalition government put in place? Certainly, the services feel that the system is working well.

When we read the legislation we see that the chief commissioners of both services will be downgraded to commissioners, with regional directors as acting commissioners and the director-general becomes the CEO of both services. I do not know what people are saying to the minister, but certainly they have some real concerns. The services will no longer own property; it will be all passed back into the ownership of the department.

There is something to be said for these authorities to be at arm's length, both for the government of the day and for the services themselves. The former coalition government found that that worked well. And that was not just us: previous Labor governments found that. So I just cannot understand what this legislation is for, unless it is to try to get certain personnel removed or shifted by changing the whole structure. However, I have some grave concerns about the effectiveness and the efficiency of this legislation and how it will affect these two vital services, the QAS and the QFRA in the future.

I would like to pay tribute to those two authorities that are currently serving in my own electorate of Caloundra. Over the 11 years that I have been the member for Caloundra, the community has been very fortunate to receive the level of service offered by those authorities. Recently, I went to a retirement send-off for a fire officer who served for 30 years in the Caloundra area, Cedric Gowlett. It was held not long after the disaster that occurred in the New York when nightly we saw firemen on our TVs losing their lives by the hundreds and going in, in extraordinarily difficult circumstances, to try to find survivors, to try to find some of their own people who could have been survivors. As a community, on a daily basis we forget the service and the selflessness of our serving officers, of our men and women who serve in these services. They are dangerous jobs. As we know, fire service officers attend to incidents on highways, which are often severe traumas, to cut open vehicles. I know of the counselling and the help that those officers need. I say to the minister that, while this is provided for, it needs to be stepped up. The stress on those men and women, which they take home to their families, has to be enormous. We lose some very good officers as a result of that stress.

The local ambulance has provided a great service to our community for many years, and I wish to comment on the local ambulance committee in particular. There are many dedicated people of all political persuasions on that committee. Former Labor Mayor Roy Harvey is a member. Ivo Rooke has headed that committee for many years. Gone are the days when the committees made money by holding chook raffles. A fair was held every year at Caloundra. There was a little train that my son used to love, there were stalls and so on. Not for one minute am I suggesting that the services should go back to those days, but such events focused the community on what the services did. The community helped to run those events, which also provided entertainment for many tourists at Christmas and Easter. We have moved on and the services should no longer have to raise money by running chook raffles. I feel that the community face of our services is very important. While in our growing communities we tend to forget that sort of thing, the local ambulance committee has not. It still fundraises.

The committee has a genuine concern about what will happen to the funds that it raises. I would like the minister to answer that question. If the funds go back into the department, it is goodbye funds. No matter what the minister's intention may be, the funds will disappear. They are not big moneys to begin with.

Mr Reynolds: No.

Mrs SHELDON: So what will happen to them?

Mr Reynolds: I will give an answer.

Mrs SHELDON: That is good, because there is real concern about that issue. Those committees still raise money and the community still gives them money. In the past that money has been roped out of the services. What was the figure? Was it \$40 million? Ambulance committees from all around the state had raised a very big sum of money and under the Goss Labor government, I think, that money was taken. It was regarded as a hollow log and it was snatched out of the hands of the people who had raised it. It did not go to providing more ambulances or anything else; it disappeared. That created a lot of resentment in the community, and rightly so. Those people had worked day and night to raise that money.

Mr Reynolds: It would be outrageous if that happened.

Mrs SHELDON: I assure the minister that it happened. It is on the record and it did happen.

Mr Reynolds: No, I said it would be outrageous now if it happened. It is not going to happen.

Mrs SHELDON: I certainly hope that it does not. I wonder how the minister will quarantine that money so that it does not disappear but is channelled back into the local community that raised it.

I would like to praise the rural fire brigades. Since the time when I was first elected as the member for Landsborough, the electorate that I represent has become much smaller because of the increasing density of the population. However, much of my electorate is still bush and there are many homes in rural areas. We rely heavily on our rural fire brigade. In fact, not that many years ago we lost a number of very wonderful firemen in a big fire and a number of firemen were very severely burnt. Some of those men and women are still suffering the trauma of that event. A couple of families have been absolutely decimated by it.

Our fire brigades can face horrific conditions, with huge winds and huge fires. They go into the unknown to help us, so that we will feel safe in our homes. It is very dry in the hinterland and rural areas at the moment, so there has been a focus on this issue. Frequently, the fire brigades are called out. Most employers of volunteer firefighters look after them, but occasionally they do not. We should look at helping our firemen and women who face that situation. I do not see why any man or woman who is giving selflessly of their time should be disadvantaged when it comes to their place of work.

The Kawana Fire Station used to be in my electorate and it still services some areas of my electorate. I have spoken before about my concerns that the levy for the service area of Kawana Fire

Station has been raised, yet Kawana was not made a permanent station. The people who live in that area were really concerned that they were paying more but were not getting any increased services.

We are very fortunate to have our emergency services personnel. They are dedicated men and women who work over and above what is required of them by their communities. I know a number of fire personnel who are involved in all sorts of other community groups and activities. They give of their free time. One often finds that they are the presidents of the local P&Cs and they are members of many other community groups. They always give of their time.

In my area, the SES performs a great job. My electorate incorporates a lot of bushland and other rugged areas that include rivers, crags and hills, and we rely very heavily on the SES. To raise money and awareness, every year the rural fire brigade holds a raft race in Bells Creek. That is very interesting. I usually help to start the race. One builds a raft and tries to paddle it across a particular section of Bells Creek and back again. Prizes are given for the best raft and the best dressed crew. All I can say is that over the years—

Mr Johnson: What do you wear, Joan?

Mrs SHELDON: No, I just start it. The event has created a lot of fun over the years. There is nothing quite like seeing big hairy firemen dressed up as fairies, paddling rafts that gradually sink under the waves as they head towards their target. The event brings the rural fire brigades to the attention of the community. The media, including the local radio stations, gets behind it. Young community groups and schools also support the event. I hope that the event continues, because it certainly brings a lot of fun to the community. On that note, I will sit down and let another member continue.
