



Speech by

**Mr T. MALONE**

**MEMBER FOR MIRANI**

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Hansard 8 November 2001

### **EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

**Mr MALONE** (Mirani—NPA) (3.20 p.m.): Today I take great pleasure in rising to speak to the Emergency Services Legislation Amendment Bill 2001. From the outset, I would like to record that the opposition will be opposing this bill. We strongly believe that to maintain the integrity and the spirit of the Queensland Ambulance Service and the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority the two services must remain independent statutory authorities.

On coming to government in 1996, the coalition believed that the changes made to the Queensland Ambulance Service and the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service by the Goss Labor government in 1993 had damaged the service delivery and morale of both services. Both services had been consumed by bureaucracy and the running of the services had been removed from the local communities. As a result of our concerns over the state of both services, the then minister, Mick Veivers, initiated an inquiry into the QFRS and the QAS by Lyn Staib. Those inquiries were completed in 1996 and 1997 respectively. Findings showed that both services, and by extension local communities and Queenslanders, would be better served if the bureaucracy was removed from the services. Therefore, they recommended that both services be established as statutory authorities.

The reasons for the changes to the structure were detailed and involved wide community consultation. The advantages of re-forming the QFRS as a statutory authority included increasing the managerial autonomy, which related to the formation of the board. With increased operational control and effectiveness, the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service would be focused strategically on operational matters. Similarly, all divisions of the service would be driven from an operational perspective. Subsidiary systems and divisions would exist only to service the needs of the operational divisions. With the freedom to operate within wider parameters without the imposition of Public Service constraints, the proposed Queensland Fire and Rescue Service would be able to respond quickly to emerging issues, be proactive in the marketplace and meet community expectations without the constraints of governmental and departmental process, provided that actions were taken in the public interest.

The proposed Queensland Fire and Rescue Service would be subject to the provisions of the Financial Administration and Audit Act and to the public sector employment legislation for the public sector employees. With the removal of bureaucratic interference, the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service would still be required to satisfy some whole-of-government reporting requirements, but the impact of the government bureaucracy process would be minimised.

A more focused sense of identity would certainly come from the change of operations. As a separate organisation within the public sector, the proposed Queensland Fire and Rescue Service would be able to establish its own identity and corporate image free from the restrictions that existed over the years since the change of legislation by the Goss government. This unique identity as a single service focused on fire prevention, hazard mitigation, rescue services and fire suppression would reflect community expectations and the aspirations of the staff while maintaining close ties with the Queensland Ambulance Service and other emergency services developed under the recent departmental umbrella.

Likewise, the reasons for changing the structure of the QAS were identified to include an increased managerial autonomy, which was specific to the make-up of the board. With increased

operational control and effectiveness as a separate statutory authority and an independent organisation at arm's length from government, the QAS could focus more effectively on operational issues and delivering quality service to meet client expectations. For example, it could get back to focusing on core business. The operating responsibilities of QAS would be predominant rather than bureaucratic expectations and reporting requirements as had been the case over the previous couple of years. With an operation focused and intent on delivering quality service, the QAS could drive its service agreements with external contractors and other divisions of the Department of Emergency Services. With the freedom to operate within wider parameters without the imposition of public service constraints, the QAS would have the freedom to respond quickly to emerging issues, be proactive in the market place and meet community expectations without the constraints of government departmental processes intervening, provided that public interest considerations were taken into account.

With the elimination of bureaucratic interference, the creation of a statutory authority reduced the whole-of-government reporting demands. There may still have been advantages in the QAS maintaining access to some whole-of-government systems, but it could choose which elements of the state government systems it retained. By streamlining the internal process and competitive response, and as the QAS no longer had to satisfy whole-of-government requirements, it had the freedom to respond quickly to emerging trends in the marketplace. It could streamline its internal business process along the lines of private industry and commercial models. Obviously, this has advantages in increasingly competitive environments within the community and in the future.

With a more focused sense of identity as a separate organisation within the public sector, the QAS could establish its own identity and corporate image free from the restrictions that have existed over the previous few years. The establishment of this unique identity as a single service focused on pre-hospital emergency care and educating the public in injury prevention reflected the community's expectations, as well as the aspirations of staff, and laid the foundations for a successful future for QAS. The unique cooperative relationship within the Queensland Fire Service and other emergency service agencies, which has developed under the departmental umbrella in the past few years, was continued and certainly fostered.

At the time of the introduction of the coalition's legislation, the then Minister for Emergency Services, Mick Veivers, in his second reading speech, outlined the details of the changes to QFRS. He stated—

The Queensland Fire Service was found to have a "1950s paramilitary style leadership and management culture" which was outmoded and inappropriate for future requirements.

It was considered that this culture contributed to low morale throughout the service by making it almost impossible to establish effective communication channels and networks throughout the state, stifling consultation, feedback mechanisms and staff input to critical decision making.

He stated that it was recommended that the most effective way to remedy these deficiencies was by the establishment of a statutory authority reporting through the board to the minister. That is the basis of our opposition to the bill, which is taking away the statutory authority and ignoring the reasons it was put in place to begin with. The bill established the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority as a separate statutory authority to enable it to operate more independently of the Department of Emergency Services—I stress 'more independently'. It seems we are heading straight back down that path.

When introducing the Ambulance Service Amendment Bill, Mr Veivers stated that the bill established the Queensland Ambulance Service as a separate statutory authority to enable it to operate more independently of the Department of Emergency Services—very similar to the QFRA—and that the primary policy objective of this was to create a more independent Ambulance Service. As I said, it was very similar to the situation with respect to the QFRA. He went on to state that the introduction of a board structure would in part complement the community involvement effected through the local ambulance committees structure, which was not affected by the bill. It is very important to stress the role that our local ambulance committees have in all of this. We have to be very careful that we do not in any way impede the role that all of the communities throughout Queensland have through their involvement in our local ambulance committees. I will speak about that a little later on. All honourable members would be well aware of the great work done in our communities by the local ambulance committees.

It is interesting to note the support during the Borbidge government's changes to the QFRA in 1996 of the then shadow minister for emergency services, Robert Schwarten, who stated—

I reiterate that the Opposition does not have any real difficulty with the concept of creating an authority to oversight the Fire Service ... the fact of the matter is that anything that seeks to broaden community input into emergency services is to be welcomed.

Those are great words—a welcome speech by the then shadow minister.

**Mr Schwarten:** Say what else I said—about why the bill was created.

**Mr MALONE:** We will not go into that. We must question how the member feels about the current changes, which will see the services removed from the community and placed back in the hands of the government. Let us be realistic about this: what we are doing in this bill is putting the QFRA and the QAS right back in the hands of the department. The reasons for changing the structure of both services to provide statutory authority status are as relevant now as they were back then. I think it is important to realise that a statutory authority just takes it one step away from the hands of government. Statutory authority status has enabled both the QFRA and the QAS to operate on a community needs basis while still being independent of the Department of Emergency Services, therefore serving all Queenslanders well. The last thing that both services need is to be bogged down with bureaucracy—a sure result of the proposed changes by this government.

To return the QAS and the QFRA services under the auspices of the Department of Emergency Services will return the services back to the Goss days of bureaucracy, inefficiency and interference. It will take away the accountability currently present in the services and it will take away the responsibility of the services to their own local communities. Importantly, this bill will place both of the services back into the control of the chief executive officer, which is the director-general. The responsibilities then are basically government dependent. It takes away quite a bit of the community response in terms of both of those organisations.

Through the removal of the boards of both the QAS and the QFRA during 1998, the Beattie government has already achieved partial independence for both services. Their actions in removing the board signal a reversal of the major reforms of the Borbidge government which have removed politics from the day-to-day operations of fire and ambulance services. At that time, I recall that the removal of the boards was an important day because it marked a return to bureaucratic control and marked the distinct demise of community input. It also marked the demise of fire service and ambulance service input.

As honourable members would well understand, the representation of the boards, whether we like it or not, was certainly a step away from the department and involved people who were not actually answerable or had no connection whatsoever to the Department of Emergency Services. Therefore, the board system did take the process away substantially from the control of government.

The removal of the board structure by then Minister Merri Rose was based on her claims that the board of the QFRA had overseen rising debt of the service and what she described as mismanagement of the trust fund. At that time of the removal of the boards the minister was unable to provide to the parliament the evidence she said supported her claims, and unfortunately the provision for the removal of the boards was passed through the parliament. I can well recollect that many questions were asked of the minister at that time in terms of giving some indication to the parliament that her claims were in some way substantiated. Even at this stage it seems quite unbelievable that a major decision was made in these circumstances without providing any concrete evidence, even if it had been compromised in some way to the parliament, to justify eliminating the boards. Sometimes we wonder whether the whole situation was engineered for political reasons rather than for the betterment of the fire service and the QAS.

Prior to the establishment of the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority Board and the Queensland Ambulance Service Board the coalition had identified that there was widespread discontent among the fire and ambulance services, as for too long they had been controlled by the bureaucracies, removed from the real focus and real issues confronting both services. Membership was removed from the decision-making process. With the decision-making process being entirely within the bureaucracy at that time, decisions were unfortunately subject to political influence and interference. All sorts of issues arose from that.

When the coalition established the board, it not only put in place an independent structure which ensured that the QFRA and QAS membership along with community representatives were involved in the decision-making process; indeed, the board was made up of community representatives and that, of course, gave some real power back down to the grassroots of our communities. It is important that we reflect on the decision the Borbidge government made, from whatever side of politics we look at it. It seems to me that right now we are pushing through a piece of legislation that completes a U-turn in terms of the independence and the free thinking of the QAS and the QFRA. The removal of the boards by the Beattie government took away this sense of independence, as I just said, and this legislation removes even further the ownership of the services by the local communities, making them more answerable to government.

A definite downside of this will be the difficulty that the local ambulance committees will find in fundraising, as any fundraising activities will be perceived as raising revenue for the government. I think this is something of which the minister really needs to take account. He will recollect that the changes that were made in, I think, 1993 by the Goss government made it increasingly more difficult for LACs to raise funds for the ambulance. I can well recollect times prior to that.

At one time we had local boards in each area, but they were probably not the best structure by which to run the QAS or our fire service. However, there was huge community involvement. I can remember when I was just a lad that the graziers would donate a beast a year to the Ambulance Service and the canefarmers would donate a truck of cane, as it was in those days, to the Ambulance Service. In our own area, in the Mackay district, they had an excess of funds. They were able to operate a very efficient and professional QAS system and build and maintain the buildings. At the end of every year they had more than enough money to do that. That was funded totally voluntarily. I wonder where we are going.

I totally understand that now that we are moving into the new century we have to make changes. The point I am trying to make is that the community involvement in those times was tremendous. It was downgraded with the changes that were made to the legislation at the beginning of the Goss era. I am fearful that the changes that the minister is making today in terms of putting the services back directly under the control of government as basically part of a departmental wing of government will be perceived—quite correctly—in our communities that they will basically be raising funds for the government.

**Mr Reynolds:** The LACs have as important a role as they have had for the last 10 years.

**Mr MALONE:** That is what the minister is saying.

**Mr Reynolds** interjected.

**Mr MALONE:** I take on board the minister's comments. Certainly the role of the LACs is important, and I recognise that. They have always felt strongly that one of their roles is to fundraise for their local ambulance.

**Mr Reynolds:** They still do.

**Mr MALONE:** Absolutely! They are adamant that they will raise funds for the local ambulance and they do it very well. The point I am making, though, is that perception has become reality in this game. Unfortunately, the perception will be that the QAS and the QFRA are a wing of government; they are part of the department.

**Mr Reynolds:** There is no reason for that perception to become the reality, though.

**Mr MALONE:** Unfortunately, I am sure that that will be the case. The fact remains that people pay enough tax now as it is. In terms of the tax burden, they believe that they are contributing excessively to the state and to the federal arena and that they really do not need to raise money to provide a service that they would expect the government to provide.

As I said, a definite downside of this will be the difficulty of the local ambulance committees to fundraise, as fundraising activities will be perceived as raising revenue for the government. At a time when both services are obviously underresourced financially—and I will talk about that a little bit later—this would prove detrimental to the local boosting of funds.

The coalition has many problems with the proposed legislation, including the total lack of community and service consultation prior to the bill's drafting. The government did not carry out any of the consultation in the drafting of the bill, including consultation with the minister's own Emergency Services Advisory Council—certainly not with senior staff of those services and the local ambulance committees and the community. Of all the criticism I have about this bill coming to the House, it seems to me quite unbelievable that the minister's own Emergency Services Advisory Council was not informed or even consulted about bringing this bill into the House. It is my understanding from the calls I am receiving that many of his senior managerial people within the service were also not consulted. Certainly in terms of the community, the consultation was a non-event.

I am not normally a cynical or sceptical sort of person, but there is a lot of legislation on the *Notice Paper* today. It really amazes me that we have a piece of legislation that really does not have to be brought into the House right now; it is not an urgent piece of legislation. There would have been time to conduct proper consultation before the legislation was actually brought into the House. Yet it was rushed in without that consultation. I think it warrants an explanation from the minister not only to me as the shadow minister but also to the public at large as to how we have this piece of legislation in the House that bypassed his ministerial advisory council, which I think is unbelievable, and that has reached this stage without any real consultation at all. That consultation is excluding, as I understand, consultation with a couple of the departmental organisations, such as the Premier's Department and possibly the Department of Industrial Relations and a couple of other departments. Other than that, I would be pleased to hear who else the minister has consulted with.

I really do not know how the minister can claim that the legislation is in the best interests of the QAS and QFRA when he did not actually seek consultation with them before bringing the bill into the House or even during drafting. It is my understanding that this is really not the way in which legislation should be drafted—certainly without real consultation and, as I said, without even consulting his own

advisory council, a group of people whom he has supposedly put in place to replace the boards to give him some understanding of what is happening out in the community. That is a fair comment.

**Mr Reynolds:** I say to the member for Mirani that I have had great support from members of my Emergency Services Advisory Council. I met with them for five hours last Monday. They gave me great support for this bill.

**Mr Johnson:** The bill had already been written.

**Mr MALONE:** It is too late then to consult.

**Mr Reynolds:** I am saying they have strongly conferred on this bill.

**Mr MALONE:** I hate to argue with the minister, but I think he will find that there are a few on his council who are not very happy about the way in which he has handled this. I am not going to push that too far, but the fact of the matter is that they should have been consulted. Three days out from debating in the House he advised the council of what he had done. I do not think that that is the way to go, but maybe I have an old-fashioned view.

We have to question why the minister has an advisory council. I know that it does a great deal of work in terms of advising the minister. Maybe it can advise him in some other ways that will help him handle some of the issues out there. Why it was not consulted on this very important issue remains a mystery to me. As I said, holding meetings after the legislation was introduced into the House does not constitute proper consultation. Even though the committee is a representative of the community, it is my understanding that the regional LACs were briefed only in recent times and were unaware that this legislation was coming before the House or even that it is before the House.

This legislation is a grossly regressive step. Inefficiencies were identified during the Staib reports of 1996 and 1997—inefficiencies that have been addressed by the statutory authority status of both services. We are now stepping back into the dark stages when the QAS and QFRA were divisions of the Department of Emergency Services and were cumbersome and bureaucratic. This is going to be a huge step backwards in service delivery through no fault of the hardworking men and women of both the QAS and the QFRA.

We all remember the financial difficulties the Queensland Ambulance Service faced during the early Goss years with the removal of the statutory authority status of the service and all the financial operations being placed under the direct control of the department. That could quite easily occur again. The lack of accountability and the lack of proper responsibility within the department for what occurs within both services could mean the problem could easily occur again. When the responsibility is taken out of the hands of the service and placed in bureaucracy—I am not trying to be overly critical of bureaucracy, but its history certainly bears some scrutiny—the responsibility of each division within QAS and QFRA is taken out of the hands of those who are directly involved with the day-to-day operations.

This legislation, as I said, is a hugely regressive step by the Beattie government and should not be passed off by the minister as a natural progression for both services. Contrary to the comments made in the minister's second reading speech, this is not a minor change and should not be treated as a minor change by either the department or the minister. It has ongoing and serious ramifications. I am also concerned that the legislation opens up the door for this government to pass further legislation in years to come. By taking away the independence of the service, the government is allowing for the amalgamation of the two services in the future.

As members would understand, the current structure is that the commissioners handle the day-to-day running of both services and the CEO—that is, the director-general—has overall control in relation to a number of areas, but we will get to that during debate on the clauses. Basically, the control of both services comes under the auspices of the CEO, which means that ultimately down the track there is the possibility of the amalgamation of the two services. A step of this kind would be detrimental to both services. It must be ruled out by the minister. I would be pleased to hear the minister—

**Mr Reynolds:** I will rule it out now. I have no idea. It is a bit of a myth and a rumour that some people like to say. I have been asked that many times in the last three weeks. Let me just rule it out completely right here and now. There is no idea of amalgamation at all.

**Mr MALONE:** I accept the minister's words, and they are admirable, but the fact of the matter is that, under the previous situation with two statutory organisations under the control of two commissioners, there was never going to be an opportunity for government to amalgamate the services. There was no opportunity.

**Mr Reynolds:** With the whisk of a legislative pen you could do it.

**Mr MALONE:** It is being done now, such is the legislative pen the minister has.

**Mr Reynolds:** There is no difference whatsoever.

**Mr MALONE:** The legislation before the House now opens that opportunity up. No matter how the minister couches his words or what sorts of reassurances he gives the House, the fact is that the

CEO can amalgamate the two services without any legislative changes at all. Even though the minister assures us that that will not happen, the opportunity is certainly there. Both the QAS and the QFRA have specialised services that they deliver to the community. The fact that sometime down the track someone can decide that emergency services provisions would be better served by an amalgamated identity is a frightening step. One has to understand that the QAS and the QFRA have different cultures. They are entirely different organisations. As I said earlier, it must be ruled out. We need to get that on the public record, but I am fearful that the bill before the House today makes it a hell of a lot easier for a minister in trouble in terms of funding to be able to make that happen.

**Mr Reynolds:** If you need a good sleep tonight, I'd have a good and restful sleep and not worry about it.

**Mr MALONE:** I have to say that we are almost seeing that happen now. In the more remote areas it is becoming more and more difficult for the QAS to be fully operational; in fact it is being run by volunteers. In situations such as that it is not very hard to imagine that, with training, those volunteers will become the single responder. I have seen gazette advertisements for staff in rural areas where it almost seems like the advertisements are designed to fail to attract staff. I use Pittsworth as an example, and I can give the minister the detailed information later. There was an advertisement for an OIC at Pittsworth at a very high level in a well-paid job, but there was no provision for accommodation. The officer who gets that job will have to find a house in that small community, but there are no houses available and no rentals available. Therefore, I would suggest that the advertisements are almost designed to ensure failure.

**Mr Reynolds:** That is a very simplistic way of looking at it, because in relation to OICs in those rural and remote areas it is the Ambulance Service itself that has indicated that it is better for ambulance officers to live away from the ambulance station and not be at work 24 hours a day within the ambulance environment. In many of those cases, as the member would know, a very high subsidy is provided. Usually there is the provision of public housing as well.

**Mr MALONE:** I hear what the minister is saying, but in a lot of those areas housing is not available—subsidy or no subsidy. I can understand not having an ambulance residence alongside an ambulance station, but in many cases the service can acquire a house a little way away from the ambulance station.

**Mr Reynolds:** I don't know of any case where an OIC hasn't been provided with a house within that area. If you would like to give me the—

**Mr MALONE:** I have the documentation here and will give it to the minister later. In relation to the amalgamation, there are no obvious benefits for the Department of Emergency Services to control both of the services. There is certainly no benefit to the community. I was interested to hear the minister make claims that there will be fairly major savings in this, and I understand he said that there would be something like a \$200,000 saving in phone bills. Am I right in saying that that is what the minister said?

**Mr Reynolds:** I'll comment on that later.

**Mr MALONE:** Okay, but it is hard to believe that there would be those sorts of savings by bringing these services under the control of Emergency Services. When the minister sums the debate up I ask him to give some concrete examples in terms of cost savings, because that is the only benefit. Within the terms of the budget, that cost saving would have to be in the order of \$400,000 or \$500,000 to make it worth while. From my perspective and the opposition's point of view, we are increasingly concerned about the role that the director-general will play in all of this under the legislation, because the director-general will be in charge of policy direction and will have financial control of the QAS and the QFRA. The commissioners themselves will only be in charge—

**Mr Reynolds:** How different is that to now? What is the difference to now?

**Mr MALONE:** I would expect the commissioners to have, as a statutory organisation, unless there is some over-the-top bureaucratic control that we are not—

**Mr Reynolds:** That just shows your lack of knowledge completely in the area. Under the Financial Administration and Audit Act, the DG is the accountable officer.

**Mr MALONE:** That is right; he is the accountable officer. I understand that.

**Mr Reynolds:** What is the difference in the legislation? There is no difference whatsoever. He is the accountable officer for every dollar now. He will be the accountable officer in the future as well.

**Mr MALONE:** The role of the commissioners certainly has been—I reluctantly use the word 'downgraded'—

**Mr Reynolds:** It has not been downgraded.

**Mr MALONE:** In terms of this legislation, I believe that is the case.

**Mr Reynolds:** The commissioners will remain the operational officers. Under the existing legislation the CEO or the director-general is the accountable officer under the Financial Administration and Audit Act. That does not change.

**Mr MALONE:** We will raise that issue when we debate the clauses. The fact of the matter is that—

**Mr Reynolds:** It does not change.

**Mr MALONE:** I am glad to hear that. From my reading of the legislation, there certainly is a changed role for the commissioners and certainly a changed role for the chief executive, the director-general.

The other issue that concerns us is that the legislation provides that property owned by QAS and QFRA will now be passed on to the department. This further removes QAS and QFRA from the communities. Going back over a long period of time, quite a number of properties around Queensland have been given to either QAS or QFRA by landowners or by councils. This land will now become part of the department's assets. I hope that the register referred to in the bill will clearly identify that land and will carry forward the understanding that was had at the time the land was excised or passed on.

I can recollect that in a number of communities around Queensland a levy was placed on, say, the sugar industry to pay for a QAS or QFRA building. That building really does belong to the community. I would like to hear from the minister how that issue will be addressed. I know that a register of properties will be established. I make the point that that register needs to clearly identify—

**Mr Reynolds:** The property is owned by the statutory authority now. The statutory authority is owned by the state. There is no difference whatsoever. It will be owned by the state. Practically, it stays in the local community.

**Mr MALONE:** The point I make is that the register and the transfer of ownership should reflect the community involvement. I think the minister is glossing over that point a little. The fact is that those communities have to be recognised as having made a contribution to the establishment of QFRA and QAS over a long period of time.

The minister stated in his second reading speech—

Experience has shown that statutory authority status, of itself, provides no tangible benefits to service delivery or community outcomes. Statutory authority status has, however, encouraged a feeling of separateness and independence from the department, resulting in unnecessary duplication of resources which has hindered the coordination of efforts to deliver the department's services in line with government priorities.

With the removal of that statutory authority status, one would have to say that both QAS and QFRA have now joined the ranks of all other government departments. I hope the minister takes the point that this moves us away from a statutory authority.

I return to the issue of perceptions and reality. Community perceptions are that QAS and QFRA are statutory authorities and slightly separate from the government—maybe not in big terms, but now they will go back to being a government department. Perceptions become reality. That gets right back to fundraising, community involvement and all of the sorts of things I spoke about earlier. There is no proof that changing the status of QAS and QFRA will improve the coordination of services and lead to better management of resources within the portfolio. I look forward to the minister's reply to the debate so that he can prove that by bringing this bill into the House a better and more economic service can be provided and that some of the issues involved with both QAS and QFRA can be addressed. The opposition believes that removal of the board structure from QAS and QFRA in 1998 has already removed some of the autonomy of the services. This legislation actually completes the removal of independence from the department.

I am not normally cynical or in any other way suspicious, but one has to wonder why full consultation with the community and the advisory council was not undertaken. One also has to wonder why a majority of members at the Kedron facility—there are 800 people at that facility—were not involved in this consultation process. That does not even include some people in the community. Does the minister believe that this legislation is so inconsequential that it was not necessary to do that? I would like to be calmed in respect of why the minister would push this forward and indeed why this legislation is so important that it precedes quite a number of very important bills on the *Notice Paper*. I look forward to receiving some comfort from the minister in that regard.

Supposedly cost savings will flow to the department. I understand that a community engagement unit will be established. I would like to know what the minister expects will be the cost to the department and exactly what that community engagement unit will be doing. How will that lead to cost savings? How will that smooth over some of the issues I have raised in terms of the perception in communities that we now have a government department supplying the services of both QAS and QFRA?

**Mr Reynolds:** Which part of the act are you referring to in terms of the community engagement unit? What does that have to do with the legislation? What part of the act are you referring to when you talk about a community engagement unit?

**Mr MALONE:** That is probably not in the bill.

**Mr Reynolds:** It is nothing to do with the bill we are debating.

**Mr MALONE:** The community engagement unit is—

**Mr Reynolds:** What does it have to do with this legislation?

**Mr MALONE:** Who cares? I am making my speech. The minister is changing the roles of QAS and QFRA. The establishment of another body that is part and parcel of this transition may not be directly related to the bill, but will the community engagement unit take over from the minister's advisory council?

**Mr Reynolds:** No. I give you that assurance as well. The community engagement unit is a unit which is being established as it is in other government departments. It is part of the policy that the Beattie government went to the election on.

**Mr MALONE:** So we will save some money by removing the statutory authorities yet we are setting up another group of people that is going to spend some more money. What is the big deal? It just seems that you are saving money and spending money at the same time but not really making a saving.

**Mr Reynolds:** That is a very simplistic argument.

**Mr MALONE:** Absolutely. The communities out there are very simplistic. If it is broken, you fix it. If it is not broken, you leave it alone. We can get tied up in the technicalities, but the reality in my community is that if there is a fire, you put it out. If a person is hurt, you fix them. If someone is sick on the side of the road, you take them to hospital. If the hospital does not work, you have got problems. It is a pretty basic life sometimes. I think we in this place have to reflect what our communities feel. Simplistically, the government is endeavouring to save money by doing something that does not necessarily have to happen now. Then the government is spending money on something that—

**Mr Reynolds:** The Community Engagement Division is about enhancing and maximising service delivery on the ground.

**Mr MALONE:** So what is wrong with the advisory council doing that?

**Mr Reynolds:** The advisory council is a completely different advisory body, meeting once every few months.

**Mr MALONE:** Two months.

**Mr Reynolds:** Every two or three months.

**Mr MALONE:** There are a couple of other issues that I want to raise. The papers prepared for the government in December 2000 indicated that there is a possibility of QAS being very severely in debt by about 2005. Something has to be done to overcome that problem. The legislation does provide that there can be some changes to subscriptions. Indeed, an emergency service levy could be put in place. This legislation will make it—

**Mr Reynolds:** You're drawing a big bow now.

**Mr MALONE:** Absolutely. We are going to explore all this during the night. There is a need to change the structure of both the fire levy and the subscription service to the QAS. The rescue side of the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority is not truly represented in terms of being funded through its on-road work. There is a real argument that, through either a levy on registrations or some other means, there should be some feedback or payback from the motoring public to the QFRS for its on-road rescue service. That is certainly in line with what is happening with this legislation.

**Mr Reynolds:** You're proposing that, are you?

**Mr MALONE:** I am not proposing it. The paper that was prepared for this government indicated that that was possible. The minister would have to admit that the subscription service and levy system within the Ambulance Service are not that healthy. There is a need to revitalise and reorganise them in some way, and they are probably going to have to be looked at sooner rather than later. I am not proposing that that should happen. I am saying that that is something the government probably will have to look at sooner or later.

**Mr Reynolds:** What are you proposing?

**Mr MALONE:** I am not proposing anything. I am a member of the opposition. The minister is part of the government.

**Mr Reynolds:** I thought you were proposing something positive.



**Mr MALONE:** No, I am not. The subscription base for the QAS is being eroded. Basically, it is not being helped by a lot of issues. I am supportive of the free pensioner transport issue. That was a fairly major cost to government, and there are a lot of issues involved in that. The role of the on-road rescue service within the QFRS is becoming almost as big—if not bigger—as the basic fire service that has existed for a long time. I suppose that this legislation does make it a little easier to implement that. Good luck to the minister. But it is going to be a big issue in the future, and it has to be faced. Sooner or later the government will have to look at that.

I have raised with the minister some of the issues relating to the Ambulance Service, and I have called on him today for an independent inquiry into some of those issues. I am disappointed that the minister has indicated that he would not go ahead with that even though, as he said, each individual case was independently audited and cleared. I referred to an ongoing unfair dismissal case in Townsville before the Industrial Commission.

**Mr Reynolds:** Is it appropriate for you to comment on that?

**Mr MALONE:** Probably not.

**Mr Reynolds:** I don't think it is.

**Mr MALONE:** It is not a court case.

**Mr Reynolds:** No, but it's before the Industrial Commission. I don't think it's appropriate for you to comment on that at all.

**Mr MALONE:** It is something that I could probably raise with the minister at a later stage. I have some very grave concerns about the way in which the department is handling that. I think we need to explore that somewhere down the track.

This morning I took heart from the minister's statement that the Ambulance Service and the people within the Ambulance Service do a great job. I totally support that sentiment. They face some very difficult times in the role that they undertake as ambulance officers. They take on board injuries and trauma that most of us do not see in our lifetimes. This certainly applies to Fire and Rescue Authority officers as well, particularly in their on-road rescue role.

Whether we talk of one suicide or 10, one is just too many. Somehow or other, both QFRA and QAS personnel should be able to appeal to an independent ombudsman. It was certainly National Party policy before the last election that we would set up some sort of independent arbiter that would be entirely separate from both organisations and to which people within the service could feel that they were able to go and receive some understanding and even some compassion. The priority 1 unit does good work. I have been briefed on that, and I understand that it helps out a lot of people. But I have to admit that there is some criticism within the service—both to the minister and to me. It is important that the unit be seen by the departmental officers as an arm of their employer. In most circumstances the consultation and the advice can come from the employer. But somewhere along the track people need somebody independent to whom they can go and who will be an advocate on their behalf.

This is probably not the time or place to explore that. But at a time when concerns are being expressed within the Ambulance Service, it is important for the minister to consider that, instead of setting up a consultative unit or something else, he should think about setting up an independent person who can listen to some of the grievances or concerns of people who are traumatised or are facing difficult circumstances within their families or their jobs so that if they do have a grievance with the department they are given some understanding. It is important to consider that. I might talk to the minister about that in the future.

As I said, this legislation is not a big deal. It is not a really important piece of legislation. It basically takes the QAS and the QFRA back to the situation that existed prior to 1996. Whether or not that is the way to go, time will tell. Hopefully the legislation will work, and hopefully the provision of services to the Queensland community will be enhanced by these changes. However, the opposition will be opposing the changes simply because we did a lot of research and we put in place what we believe is the best managerial system for the QAS and the QFRA.

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