



Speech by

ANDREW McNAMARA

MEMBER FOR HERVEY BAY

Hansard 4 September 2002

ELECTRICAL SAFETY BILL

Mr McNAMARA (Hervey Bay—ALP) (3.45 p.m.): As a former director of Ergon Energy and a current member of the ETU, I am very pleased to be able to speak to the Electrical Safety Bill 2002. We have in this bill a solid foundation for a well-planned and coordinated attack on the unacceptable number of deaths and injuries caused by electrical incidents in Queensland. It offers all parties—including industry, unions and the community—the opportunity to take part in developing strategies for further improving Queensland's electrical safety.

Today, I would like to draw the attention of the House to one of the outstanding features of the bill—the new Electrical Safety Board and its role in the development of a strategic plan for electrical safety. The board will be chaired by a new statutory office holder, the Commissioner for Electrical Safety, appointed to advise the minister on electrical safety matters and standards. It is important to note that the new advisory board and its statutory committees will form part of an overarching system designed to resolve much of the fragmentation that previously existed. For example, under the old structure, problems arose from the fact that we had three boards or committees operating independently of each other. The Electrical Contractors and Workers Board, the Electrical Health and Safety Council and the Electrical Approval and Energy Labelling Advisory Committee all existed independently. Through consultation and feedback, it emerged that most stakeholders were unhappy with this set-up since there were no direct links between the three bodies. Consequently, the industry encountered a lack of coordination. That will be history.

Under the new set-up, we will have a single body, the Electrical Safety Board, chaired by the commissioner and including the director-general of the department and six members appointed by the minister. The six appointees will consist of two representatives each from employer organisations, workers' representatives and the general community. I am delighted that workers' representatives will have this direct input. I know from recent discussions with Dick Williams of the ETU that there is no issue of greater concern to the union and its members than safety.

The board will oversee three committees that will support the board by giving advice and recommendations. The new committees are the Electrical Licensing Committee, the Electrical Safety Education Committee and the Electrical Equipment Committee. The Electrical Licensing Committee will provide advice on electrical licences and training, take disciplinary action where necessary against holders of electrical work licences and hear appeals relating to electrical licences. The Electrical Safety Education Committee will advise on the promotion of electrical safety in workplaces and the community. Then there is the Electrical Equipment Committee, which will provide advice on the safety of electrical equipment such as kitchen appliances. The committees will be the backbone of a much more streamlined system, obviously designed to better serve all stakeholders in terms of electrical safety.

Primarily, the new Electrical Safety Board will provide advice and make recommendations to the minister about policies, strategies and legislative arrangements for improved electrical safety. The board will advise the minister on state, national and international electrical safety issues and make recommendations. It will promote electrical safety in the workplace and the broader community. However, one of the most important aspects of the board's functions will be the development of a five-year strategic plan for improving electrical safety. This five-year plan will provide all stakeholders with the longer-term focus we need to achieve great things in electrical safety. I look forward to the time when the seeds we plant in Townsville today start to bear fruit in the form of a significant decrease in the number of deaths and injuries caused by electricity.

I would like to take just a moment to reflect on the human cost of electrical accidents. Last week, I was delighted to accept an invitation to go out on a commercial fishing boat in Hervey Bay to have a first-hand look at what professional net fishermen do every day. At 2.30 a.m. last Thursday morning, I left the Urangan boat harbour with Brett Fuchs. We met up with his father, Wayne Fuchs, at Burrum Heads and fished for school mackerel for six hours before going home, and we luckily caught a few. The Fuchs family is famous in Hervey Bay's fishing community and contributes heavily to the community through support for events like Hervey Bay's Seafood Festival.

But we were much more lucky to be there at all. Six weeks ago, Brett and Wayne went to go out one morning. Wayne picked up a power tool, which had been plugged in and, due to faulty wiring, had become live. To Brett's horror, he was confronted with the sight of his father jerking violently as 240 volts coursed through his system. He reacted with decisive bravery and threw himself not once, but twice, at his father to knock him off the live appliance. The first attempt failed and Brett was booted three metres by the electricity. He got up, because he had to, and went and had a second try to get his father off the power. Despite having been shocked twice after he knocked his father off the power, he then performed CPR on his father for nine and a half minutes until an ambulance arrived. Wayne Fuchs was not breathing for nine and a half minutes. He is alive today because of the heroism, determination, cool headedness and love of his son, Brett. Last Thursday morning as I watched Wayne pulling in nets and fish for six hours, I told him that he was looking pretty good for a bloke who had been dead recently.

On that occasion, a family kept its father, husband and grandfather. But it does not always turn out like that. People die. Rescuers die. Families are destroyed. The price of electrical accidents is just too high. I commend the minister for bringing this bill to the parliament and I commend it to the House.