



Speech by

CHRISTINE SCOTT

MEMBER FOR CHARTERS TOWERS

Hansard 3 September 2002

FLYING FOX, CHARTERS TOWERS

Mrs CHRISTINE SCOTT (Charters Towers—ALP) (12.07 p.m.): I am sure it will come as no surprise that today I would like to inform the House about the flying fox problem we have in my home town. This matter is of great concern to the people of Charters Towers. We have seen the problem worsen in recent times through the proliferation of misinformation and the flames of an already emotive issue being fanned by just about every political hopeful and everyone else with an axe to grind we could shake a stick at.

When this situation first became apparent, I saw the issue as essentially being between the local council and the QPWS. After the council was unsuccessful in getting the flying foxes to relocate from the park, I was attacked in the media for supposedly being silent on the issue. Following successful approaches to our Minister for the Environment, Dean Wells, for a mitigation permit to remove the flying foxes, I was attacked again for sticking my bib into this. It seems there is just no satisfying some people.

At this point, it is worth noting that damage mitigation permits have been issued to council on four separate occasions and council has been unsuccessful in its attempts to move the flying foxes on. It has been suggested council did not make any real attempt to shift the flying foxes on three of the four occasions. Whether the problem has been a lack of resolve, resources or knowledge does not really matter. What does matter is that the problem exists. What does matter is that next time we try to shift the flying foxes, we, the community of Charters Towers, are armed with the necessary resolve and knowledge to get the job done.

The number of flying foxes in our park has been estimated recently at about 10,000. Of course, there is going to be a major problem if 10,000 animals of any sort suddenly take up residence in a park. If it were 10,000 dogs, cats or emus there would be a public outcry and council would have to take the necessary steps to remove the animals. That is the job we expect councils to undertake on our behalf. Of course, there may be laws which require councils to obtain permits from government to carry out their obligations on behalf of their community. In this case the permits were forthcoming. Once the flying foxes have been moved on there needs to be a plan in place to discourage them from taking up residence in our park again should they return at some future date. With this in mind I have initiated a community solutions workshop involving key stakeholders—council, community leaders and representatives of relevant government departments—to be held next week. My intention is to involve the community in formulating an integrated action plan which will address not only the issue of removing the flying foxes now but also putting in place a proactive response strategy to address the matter in the long term. Let us move the flying foxes on and make sure they do not return in problem numbers in the future. Much has been said and written about this issue and much misinformation has been peddled and I call on the minister to assist us with a relevant public education program.

Mr Wells: I am happy to do that.

Mrs CHRISTINE SCOTT: I thank the minister. What is indisputable in this whole matter is that flying foxes are noisy, smelly and massively inconvenient. They have no place in our park in these sorts of numbers and they have to go, because people come before flying foxes. What I propose is an approach which takes into consideration the whole range of issues. To simply go out and start shooting the animals, as has been suggested by some people, would solve no problems in the long term and create a whole raft of others. Who of those who advocate these extreme measures is going to take

responsibility if a wounded animal were to bite a child? The best advice we have suggests that the danger of contracting the lyssavirus occurs when someone is bitten or scratched. Are any of those people willing to risk our children's lives to prove their point? One would hope commonsense will prevail and those who advocate such drastic measures will think again. As I said earlier, this is an emotive issue. I have been vilified in the local press, verbally assaulted at a school function and torn to shreds by the sharp tongues of those who whisper behind their hands. But my conscience is clear.

A government member: But you can take it.

Mrs CHRISTINE SCOTT: Yes, I can take it. I do not have this job because I do not have any steel in my soul. My conscience is clear; I know I have done everything I could to bring about a resolution to this problem. I am determined we will solve the problem together and I will continue to work in the best interests of our community. I will not be panicked into making knee-jerk reactions or taking unconsidered actions inappropriate for a member of parliament. I assure the people of Charters Towers I will continue to work tirelessly to find a workable solution to this problem and am confident that by working together as a community we can achieve the results we are looking for.