



Speech by

Mrs D. PRATT

MEMBER FOR NANANGO

Hansard 4 September 2002

ELECTRICAL SAFETY BILL

Mrs PRATT (Nanango—Ind) (3.05 p.m.): I rise to speak on the Electrical Safety Bill 2002 and to commend the government for implementing a bill directed at eliminating the human cost to individuals, families and the community through death or injury caused by electricity. I am familiar with quite a few families who have experienced a loss or near loss of a family member, more often than not the breadwinner. Being from a rural area, many people have in the past undertaken various repairs to electrical work without the expertise to do so. Even the installation of wiring to sheds and the outbuildings were taken on by many farmers and there was overall, until recent times, a fairly relaxed attitude to electricity and electrical safety. Slowly but surely people are becoming aware of the danger, but it is all too slow when we hear of a life being lost.

I was shocked to read in the research paper of the number of deaths attributed to electrical accidents—116 between 1990 and 2000—with many of these deaths of persons involved in the electrical industry itself. What astounded me even more was the high number of deaths of the general public—71 of these 116. It proves that the lack of knowledge and respect is the real killer with electricity, that ignorance of the real dangers is involved. As most members know, my husband is an aerial sprayer, and this necessitates flying low to the ground and, more often than not, under powerlines. It is a recognised fact that more agricultural pilots are brought down because of powerlines being unmarked and unseen by the pilot. On some powerlines the electrical companies are required to place markers at various intervals to make them visible to normal air traffic above 200 feet, and aircraft not flying Ag tend to stay higher than that and avoid them. Most wires go unmarked, and virtually no consideration is given to agricultural pilots who contribute a lot to our economy and who are exposed to this particular danger on a constant, flight by flight basis.

Their work could involve in excess of 20 or 30 flights or even more a day. Although it may sound a little on the self-interest side, I want my husband to remain safe for a long time and a part of my life. It is only by being a part of any industry that we find out where the problems associated with that industry arise. It is this lack of visibility which has impacted on many farmers when they move equipment from place to place on their properties, machinery which continues to get larger and taller than it ever was in the past. The reason offered by the electricity companies, when I asked, was that it was too expensive to place markers on powerlines in open paddocks in rural areas. Expensive it may be, but it is extremely costly to have powerlines brought down. It is extremely costly for businesses to shut down because of accidents and it can be extremely costly if a life is lost because of a visibility failure.

Those involved in agriculture have found themselves beneficiaries of the 'look up and live' campaigns as many who have flirted with irrigation pipes and lived will testify. Only a couple of years ago a family I know very well lost a husband and father, which left three beautiful daughters and a young wife struggling to continue their lives. They found it impossible to continue, and all us realise that an electrical accident will change lives forever.

Although this is deviating from the path somewhat, I ask the minister to take into consideration this lack of visibility, be it from the ground, for low flying aircraft as an associated issue dealing with the dangers of this work. Again, the figures for 1999-2000 are astounding in that 20 per cent of the deaths were electrical workers, people one would expect to have a greater respect for this dangerous commodity. Education programs must continue to address the problem of complacency within the

public sector. It is often said that familiarity breeds contempt, and for the high number of electrical workers this may be the case. Education must continue for them as well. That Queensland has as an average of 3.57 fatalities per million people may not seem an awful lot, but when compared to the national average it is very obvious that we have let down our constituents and our industry when it comes to ensuring their safety. That we have the second highest rate of electrical fatalities and that that rate is 60 per cent above the national average is in fact a disgrace.

It is apparent that all stakeholders are given greater obligations under this bill, and that includes people who might affect the safety of others through acts of omission. One of the key recommendations of the bill is the appointment of a commissioner and related staff and a new statewide inspectorate to investigate and audit activities to ensure compliance. As this appears not to have been achieved in the past, it is essential that an overall coordination of this kind of activity be undertaken.

The mandatory installation of safety switches is something I endorse fully. Having benefited personally from a safety switch, I am an extremely strong advocate for the installation of these devices in all homes, not just new ones. However, I share concerns that making these switches compulsory will result in rising installation charges in the future. The estimated cost to the government of implementing this legislation is said to be significant. However, I doubt anyone would begrudge the significant cost involved if it saves even a single life. I can only concur with all honourable members' statements in this chamber in addressing this bill, and I commend it to the House.