



Speech by

GARY FENLON

MEMBER FOR GREENSLOPES

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BUILDING AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr FENLON (Greenslopes—ALP) (2.30 p.m.): It is a great pleasure to rise today to speak very briefly on the Building and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2001. I congratulate the minister on bringing this very important piece of legislation before the House. I refer to its importance because of the government's enormous responsibility to legislate effectively in this area. That legislative responsibility extends, at a very general level and at an economic level, to addressing the backpacker industry, which contributes an estimated \$480 million to this state. It is certainly a very substantial industry on any estimation. Its credibility and its integrity in the international sphere are at stake, so we must ensure that safety measures are properly regulated.

That legislative responsibility extends not only to the economic level but also to fundamental issues of personal safety. This parliament has a moral responsibility to ensure the safety of all persons—Australians and tourists—who live in low-budget accommodation around Queensland. Those types of accommodation are situated in my electorate of Greenslopes and I consider those residents to be friends. Buildings which might be described as hostels are situated in my electorate and over the years I have taken a great interest in those institutions and in ensuring the welfare of the residents in them.

These categories of accommodation are often controversial because they house people who are disabled or who have a range of other problems—perhaps a drinking problem or a drug problem. One could almost view these places as one step back from a nursing home in terms of the quasi care situations that might occur within them. That is one area of interest that I have in this particular piece of legislation, as well as the general interest of welfare for these people throughout Queensland.

In my younger days, I travelled extensively and stayed in many hostels. I shudder to think of the precarious and dangerous situations I might have been in, especially as I travelled through countries such as Afghanistan.

Mr Johnson: There's not very much of it left, is there?

Mr FENLON: There is probably very little of it left today. Certainly wherever people are, they are entitled to basic levels of care. The fundamental issue of care is what is at stake here and it is at the heart of this legislation. There is an expectation that people will live safely in this accommodation, whether they are short-term or long-term residents.

Fire is just one of a range of pertinent safety issues. I worry about the safety of young people staying in these places, in terms of the integrity exercised by the proprietors of these establishments and whether they will ensure that the residents are not subject to attack or any other predatory behaviour from people in positions of authority or from outsiders.

There are a range of issues that are relevant in these places to ensure the safety of people. Every member in this place who is a parent would be well aware of that. If we place one of our own sons or daughters in these establishments, we want only the best for them and, as such, we want only the best for those parents overseas who have their children staying in institutions in Queensland. I know that every person in this House and my community felt very deeply for the people who lost children in the Childers backpacker fire. It was a great tragedy that was felt by every single Queenslanders. We know, perhaps to some degree, how those parents felt.

It is indeed an appropriate response that today we are making a start on the road to regulating and improving safety in this backpacker industry. The point I make very clearly is that this is a start. There are probably many other areas to address in terms of ensuring that young people, and particularly those from overseas, who stay in these places are well cared for and that they are not threatened or jeopardised in any way.

In conclusion, I strongly suggest to all proprietors of these institutions who continue to operate in the future, whether they are in hostels for disabled people in my electorate or in the tourist regions, that no matter what is done in terms of concrete safety measures which are mandated within this bill, that no matter what physical apparatus is in place—in terms of fire alarms, lights, escape routes, procedures, et cetera, all of which are referred to in the bill—there is no substitute for a human being on duty for as much of the time as is possible, especially during night hours when many dozens of people could be fast asleep in a building. Some of those people may have been drinking or they may be on medication, and there may be some difficulty in those people even being roused by electronic alarms, et cetera. There is no substitute whatsoever for having human beings supervising on the spot 24 hours a day. That should be foremost in the consciousness of proprietors in the future.

In an ongoing review of this legislation and the workings of hostels, I hope that matter is kept foremost in the minds of the relevant departments to ensure that these places are well supervised; that the people who are sleeping during the night are protected not only from fire but from any other form of predation. I welcome this legislation. I commend the minister for bringing this bill before the House and I commend it to honourable members.
