



Speech by

Mr JIM PEARCE

MEMBER FOR FITZROY

Hansard 31 October 2002

EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr PEARCE (Fitzroy—ALP) (5.29 p.m.): This government is committed to a system of emergency services that is of an international standard—services that are able to plan and work together in times of emergencies, are publicly owned and focus on the needs and expectations of the community. Queensland's Emergency Services are excelling in their work and we have much to be proud of in this state. In Queensland, we have what I consider to be the most efficient and effective emergency service teams in Australia. Over the years, I have seen how they go about providing emergency responses to situations where lives and property are involved.

I have had personal experiences where I have witnessed the skills and expertise of our QAS officers and the fire and rescue officers. I know of the capabilities of our helicopter rescue services, our aerial ambulances and the flying doctor. I also acknowledge and appreciate the commitment of our State Emergency Services employees and volunteers, our rural fire brigades, our coastguard and all of those people who go out there to do that job of looking after the community in times of an emergency. All of those services are backed by the Queensland Police Service. I think that we should give them a mention, because in times of emergency we appreciate their professional approach to the way in which they do their job and work in with the various services to meet the crisis at the time.

One thing that I think that sometimes we forget—and I make a habit of making sure that I remember when I go to functions in my electorate—is to recognise the role that the partners and families play in the lives of our Emergency Services workers. Our Emergency Services workers put their lives on the line to protect and save the lives and property of Queenslanders. The partners and families of many employees make sacrifices so that Emergency Services can respond in the shortest possible time. The families and partners of our Emergency Services workers and volunteers are there to answer the phone and to act as couriers. They sacrifice family time and spend many anxious hours waiting for loved ones to return home. I think that we all realise and appreciate that, without their support, our Emergency Services personnel could not sustain the high standard of service that we have come to take for granted.

The objectives of the legislation that we are debating are to make a range of miscellaneous amendments to improve the administration of the Fire and Rescue Act 1990, known as the fire act; the Ambulance Service Act 1991, known as the ambulance act; and the State Counter-Disaster Organisation Act 1975, known as the SCDO act. The bill improves community representation on the Emergency Services Advisory Council, it updates the statutory job description of the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service to better reflect current operational realities, it improves the administration of local ambulance committees under the ambulance act, and puts beyond doubt the ability of officers to exercise emergency powers to minimise the impact of impending disasters under the SCDO act.

A provision of the bill increases the membership of the Emergency Services Advisory Council, known as the ESAC. That body has been reporting to the minister since 1998 on issues relating to the extent to which the delivery of fire, ambulance and other disaster management and emergency services meets community needs. The membership of that ESAC comprises community representatives with a variety of complementary expertise and experience, all of relevance to Emergency Services. The fire act currently limits the membership of that council to 14. To improve the delivery of emergency services to rural, remote and indigenous communities, it is proposed to increase

the current membership of that council from 14 to 16 to allow for Torres Strait Islander and additional regional community representation. I support that provision, because it will ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are better represented and that rural and remote people have a means of ensuring that their concerns and issues get into the system.

It is most important for the government to respond to the public needs of developing policy, making legislative changes and providing resources. A broader range of people on the advisory council will be able to make sure that the government is able to get messages passed on from that grassroots level. So I support the allocation of additional members to the council. I think that it is a good move. It will only improve the way in which we do business.

The bill also contains a provision to improve the administration of local ambulance committees. I will give members a little bit of the history of that. In 1997, the LACs commenced a review of existing constitutions and the development of a new model draft constitution. The minister approved a new model constitution for LACs in March 2002. Currently, all 175 LACs operate under constitutions that had previously been the subject of ministerial approval. The bill proposes to revoke the existing constitutions and replace them with the approved new constitution. The review also identified a range of changes to the ambulance act that would facilitate the more efficient administration of LACs. The proposed amendments increase the maximum membership limit for LACs from nine to 15; they will allow committee members to be drawn from the general public and to clarify the ability of ministers to dismiss LACs.

I think that the LACs do a wonderful job. The broader community would not realise and appreciate just how much work they do—they are just another group of volunteers working in the community. I know how much work goes into those LACs, because my wife is a member of the Rockhampton LAC. I know the number of times that she has been called on to work at functions and attend meetings, all with the one focus of raising funds to help improve the facilities, equipment and work environment of our ambulance officers.

It is important that our ambulances have the latest technology that not only helps save lives but also assists patients in transit, ensuring that they have the best possible mobile patient care environment. I know that ambulance officers right across Queensland appreciate the quality of the equipment that is provided to them because of the work of LACs. The LACs have also contributed to the improvement of facilities for ambulance officers, particularly in rural and isolated areas, where it is important that relieving officers have comfortable living areas when they go out and do relief work.

From my experience of living in rural Queensland, I can say that some LACs are certainly more active than others. That can be because of a number of reasons, such as the demographics or the needs of the ambulance centre. It gets to a stage at which even personalities can influence the way in which an LAC performs. Some LACs stand out and I have a number in my electorate that I think are doing a great job. Places such as Dysart, Middlemount, Blackwater, a little place called Duaringa, Moura, Mount Morgan and Baralaba all have local ambulance committees.

Mr Mulherin: Thangool.

Mr PEARCE: Thangool is not in my electorate, but it would have a good LAC, because they are rural people living in a rural town looking after rural communities.

I know that this is being a little bit unfair to all the other LACs in my electorate, but I would like to mention one LAC, and that is the Wowan LAC at the Wowan Ambulance Station. That LAC has worked tirelessly. Wowan is a very small community—probably no more than a couple of dozen houses, but certainly, a lot of people live in the surrounding rural area. Over the years that committee has worked tirelessly to provide what I consider to be one of the most attractive facilities in Queensland.

With the computer equipment, airconditioning and comfortable living area the committee has provided, it is just like going to a motel. The women have become involved in terms of putting in curtains and painting the place. There are decent beds and all those things that make people feel more comfortable. Relieving officers—and this is why I think it is important to get across this message—actually put up their hand to go to places like Wowan. I know that the minister recently visited a number of emergency services facilities in central Queensland. I know that the minister was impressed with what he saw at Wowan in terms of the effort to make that facility attractive. The interesting thing about the Wowan LAC—and they will appreciate the changes to the legislation—is that it has a limit of nine on its committee but had about 30 other members from the community—

Mr Lawlor: What do the others do in town?

Mr PEARCE: I object to the member from the sand city of the Gold Coast casting a slur on one of my communities, because it is a vibrant community. The member probably will not interject on me like that again.

It was interesting to turn up at that particular ambulance station and learn that although the committee has nine members there were 20 to 30 other people who considered themselves members. I recently visited the south-west and spoke to a number of people in that ambulance service. It was very

clear that the LACs out there support their ambulances with great determination. There is no doubt that LACs play a very important role in the betterment of delivery of service and the quality of life of ambulance officers. The ability of an LAC to carry 15 members will ease the workload on a lot of other committee members who have to do that work. It also encourages more people to get involved and continue that good work.

My words today will only support what other members have already said and will say, namely, that local ambulance committees do an outstanding job in our community. I do not think that the broader community really appreciates just how valuable are these committees in terms of the amount of work they do, the load this takes off the government because of the funds they raise, the equipment they provide for ambulances and the type of facilities they provide for our ambulance officers in rural and remote communities.

The amendment bill also allows for changes to the State Counter-Disaster Organisation Act 1975. This bill improves the state's ability to deal effectively with impending disasters by clarifying the ability to use emergency powers. The State Counter-Disaster Organisation Act 1975 provides for a declaration of a disaster to be made by persons authorised to deal with disasters. Once a declaration has been made, a range of emergency powers becomes available. These powers include coordinating resources, commandeering equipment, evacuation and exclusion of people, right of entry to property and closure of roads and public places. It is very important that those powers are there so that that coordination can occur. I do not care how well drilled as individual groups the local fire service, ambulance or police are, because in times of real emergency when there is a real disaster it is important that coordinating powers step in to pull together all these services so that we can be effective and deliver the service that everybody in the community expects.

Generally, most disasters experienced by the state are dealt with without the necessity to access special emergency powers. A declaration of disaster is made only in extreme circumstances. It has not been necessary to make such a declaration for several years. I hope we never reach a situation where we have to do it again. Unfortunately, life being the way it is, it will happen. It is necessary to distinguish between a declaration under the Commonwealth-State Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements and the state disaster relief arrangements and a declaration of a disaster under the act. The sole purpose of a declaration under the relief arrangements is to allow disaster funding arrangements to be assessed. It is not necessary to make a declaration under the act to assess these funding arrangements. The purpose of a declaration of disaster under the act is to allow emergency powers to be exercised in extreme situations. Crown Law advice has revealed the legal uncertainty concerning the ability to exercise emergency powers to minimise the impact of impending disasters. The policy of this legislation is intended to allow exercise of emergency powers to minimise the impact of impending disasters.

The bill puts beyond doubt the existence of such powers. An example where those powers might be used could be where a private dam is threatening to break. As we go on in the years ahead, there is the potential for that sort of thing to occur. The powers need to be there so that we can take the necessary action and prepare the community for whatever may be the consequences. This bill will allow for the exercise of powers to do engineering works on such a dam to try to remove risk and also to evacuate persons who may be impacted upon by the dam's breaking. There is no point leaving it until it happens. To do such work, we need the pertinent powers. Powers are available only upon a declaration of disaster and respect fundamental legislative principles.

Clarifying the ability to exercise emergency powers to minimise the impact of impending disasters makes good commonsense. No doubt, this feature of the amendment bill will help make Queensland a safer place to live in the future as it has a Department of Emergency Services which can continue to do its job properly. As a rural member, I am very proud of the quality of emergency services in Queensland. I have a very close working relationship with the rural fire brigade services in my area. As I said earlier, I have experienced the good work and the efficient, effective work of emergency services. I will always be more than honoured to stand in this place and support wherever I can legislation or policy that ensures that we do more to help our emergency services to be more effective or to continue to be as effective as they have been in the past.
