



Speech by

CHRIS CUMMINS

MEMBER FOR KAWANA

Hansard 28 May 2003

COMMUNITY AMBULANCE COVER BILL

Mr CUMMINS (Kawana—ALP) (12.57 p.m.): For past decades the Queensland Ambulance Service, under various names, has been a very well respected, life-saving emergency service that has assisted probably every Queenslander either directly or indirectly. This new ambulance levy is controversial, and I have no doubt that it will cost the government votes. Seats like mine at Kawana on the Sunshine Coast are very marginal. A couple of hundred votes either way will see me lose my seat. Some in this House would be very happy. Some in my community would be happy—I hope the minority. I remember an elected representative, for whom I have great respect, saying to me, 'Chris, when you decide what you think is the right way to go, make sure at the end of the day that in your heart it is the right decision. When you are alone with your thoughts, only you can satisfy yourself that you made the right decision.'

In my heart I know that properly funding the best ambulance service for Queenslanders is the right decision. If Queenslanders find themselves in an emergency situation, not only do they need the best; they deserve the best. Under this new legislation all Queenslanders will be covered anywhere in Australia. That is nationwide use of the ambulance emergency services. Under the previous voluntary contribution scheme—a system that I and my family have been part of for many years—those who did not wish to voluntarily contribute the annual fee, those who did not think it was worth contributing to, would be the first to pick up the phone and call for an ambulance. These are the people who would never pay their bills, thus further burdening those who subscribed voluntarily.

Like many, I have first-hand knowledge of the Queensland Ambulance Service. My wife took very ill after she was advised to take a couple of Panadols and rest by a local doctor we attended because of her internal pains. When we went home after a few hours, the situation became much worse until an ambulance was needed to rush her to hospital. She had peritonitis, a severe internal infection.

When one of your loved ones wakes up screaming and you know that there is little you can do but ring and wait for an ambulance, it is extremely reassuring to have confidence in the professionals when they reach your door. My wife has been rushed to hospital, and that is something that I never, ever wish upon anyone. Whether it be one of your immediate family, your loved ones or your friends, when calling 000 for an ambulance it is a very frightening time; a time when I hope Queenslanders will have peace of mind, knowing that we have the best ambulance service that we can provide.

Many members know that I am extremely proud of my four-year-old son, Daniel. As he grows older, there would be no bigger disappointment to me than if he said to me, 'Dad, you made a mistake on such-and-such an issue. You knew what was right and what to do to make a difference for our society, for our community, and you made a bad mistake. You copped out. You took the soft option.' I know that this is no mistake. I know that this is the best ambulance service for all Queenslanders. No-one has ever questioned that the best ambulance service is needed. What some have questioned is how it should be funded and who should actually pay.

Often we hear of the 'not in my backyard' syndrome. This, sadly, is more of the 'I think it's a good idea but I don't think I should be the one to pay' syndrome. The Queensland Ambulance Service will now come with a cost—\$88 per year or, as it breaks down quarterly, \$22 per electricity bill. I encourage any pensioner and anyone who will be exempted who has written saying that they would be

only too happy to donate that amount as they may have in the past to do so. They can either donate to their very well respected local ambulance committees or donate to the Energex rescue helicopter or the RACQ rescue helicopter.

I will be sending this speech out electronically to all of those people I can across my electorate. While many people may not agree with what I say, I have not been told of a fairer or more open collection system that ensures that the great Queensland Ambulance Service is properly funded to a degree so that all Queenslanders will feel safe in the knowledge that the high standards of professional emergency service are ensured for Queenslanders. That is the challenge for any members opposite and, make no mistake, they have had months and months and months to come up with a different system. None is or has been or will ever be forthcoming. I pray that Queenslanders accept this system and acknowledge that the Beattie government has made a tough decision, a decision that sadly may cost votes and indeed may cost people like me a seat in this state parliament trying to represent people in an open and honest way.

Sitting suspended from 1.01 p.m. to 2.30 p.m.

Debate, on motion of Mr Cummins, adjourned.

Resumed from p. 2227.

Mr CUMMINS (Kawana—ALP) (2.35 p.m.), continuing: I was stating that after years as an elected representative the best advice I was given was to ensure that when you know something is right in your heart, try to enunciate why you believe that is right in your heart and ensure that you get it on the record that way. I have no doubt that there will be a division called on the bill before the House, and I will be proudly voting in support of it because people must stand up and do what they think is right not only to save their own hide but also to do the right thing for our fellow Queenslanders both now and in the future. I support this legislation and challenge those who do not to put on the public record a better way of doing things. They should not just whinge and whine but put up a genuine alternative. I know that I will not be holding my breath.

I have come to know the efficiency and professionalism of this extremely dedicated bunch of workers, whom we know and affectionately refer to as 'ambos'. The Queensland Ambulance Service is second to none in its professionalism and dedication not only nationwide but also internationally. We must acknowledge that the high standard and professionalism of training that they receive is of direct benefit to every Queenslanders and indeed every visitor to this state. My best man and groomsman at my wedding—two of my best mates—are both paramedics, so obviously I know first-hand some of the insights today's paramedics face on a daily basis. Many of us will remember fondly the Queensland parliament's historic sitting in Townsville last year where the Beattie government said it was going to the regions to give the people a chance to be heard and for all state members to listen to others in areas outside our own.

At that point in time employees of the QAS needed to test that to see if members of the Beattie Labor government were indeed listening. At many of the functions we were greeted by a sombre, dedicated and stretched to the limits group of protesters—that is, QAS employees. I took advantage of talking to these employees numerous times, whether it be in front of the Convention Centre, at the public barbecue on The Strand or wherever. While many of their placards stated very strong and forthright messages, I must commend them on their normally positive and polite attitude. These dedicated emergency workers pleaded with members on both sides of this House to do something to ensure a properly funded Queensland Ambulance Service so they could go to another level of professionalism, something that they sincerely believe all Queenslanders and visitors to our great state deserve and obviously need.

These QAS workers are not after a money grab. They are after an across-the-board improvement to a service that I again say every single Queenslanders will either have first-hand knowledge of or know someone very close to them who has had a first-hand experience with. It is not fair that our ambulance workers have to go and battle and sell chook raffles, raffles in pubs and wherever merely to get money to put necessary emergency equipment in vehicles that are world class. What do we hear from the opposition? Members should check *Hansard*. The Liberal leader of three, realising that the other two have had a go at being leader and are about to retire, said that the Emergency Services Minister failed to fight in cabinet to see the QAS fully funded. But then he went on to say that the voluntary ambulance subscription fully funded the service—a simple contradiction from those who fail to attempt to sincerely address an issue that affects all Queenslanders. It is shallow rhetoric from a shallow opposition. It has been difficult, but I commend the minister, Queensland's emergency workers and the minister's ministerial and departmental staff. I proudly support the Queensland Ambulance Service.