



Speech by
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COMMUNITY AMBULANCE COVER BILL

Dr WATSON (Moggill—Lib) (4.20 p.m.): I rise to speak very briefly on the Community Ambulance Cover Bill 2003. This bill is a mechanism for the Beattie government to further tax Queenslanders. It will not only further tax Queenslanders, but it will do so in a most unfair and discriminatory manner. As usual, the Beattie government tries to blame everyone else when it wants to raise taxes. This is a standard operating procedure of this government. Members saw what happened when this was being announced. The first thing that happened was that the Premier blamed the bludgers. He said that there were 10,500 bludging Queenslanders who had not paid \$8.1 million in service bills and that was the justification for raising the tax. There was nothing said about what the Beattie government would do to actually get that money; it was simply an excuse to raise taxes.

The second group to be blamed was the federal government. That is the standby for this government. If the Beattie government has a problem, it blames the feds. What does it blame the feds for? It blames the feds for giving people the incentive to take out private health insurance. The federal government gives people incentive to take out private health insurance—that has an impact upon subscriber numbers—and the federal government gets blamed for the shortfall in ambulance subscription. What absolute nonsense! The fact of the matter is that Australia is better off and Queensland is better off in a financial sense by having people looking after their own health insurance. That was the reason, and it does not flow at all that that is the problem of the ambulance service.

From what I have heard from the Premier, the government has only been able to identify a \$30 million shortfall. That was the argument that was put forward. There was a total \$30 million shortfall, and yet everything we have seen financially shows that the government will raise \$110 million in taxes. It is about time this government explained why, for a \$30 million shortfall, it has to raise \$110 million in taxes. It is not to cover the shortfall in the ambulance subscription; it is to fund other aspects of the budgetary process. That is the simple reason. Otherwise, why does the government need to raise \$110 million to cover a supposed \$30 million shortfall? That is the issue, that is what people understand, and those are the kinds of issues that are being raised.

I have a heuristic approach, that is, a rule of thumb, to judge whether an issue is particularly important to the electorate. Probably all members have a feeling for what is important in their electorate. If I get half a dozen emails or telephone calls or letters on a particular subject I know that it is a particularly important issue in my electorate. I reached that number after less than two days of the announcement being made, and the number has increased since that particular time. This is an important issue. It is an issue that is affecting ordinary Queenslanders, people who have invariably worked hard in their life, who are actually contributing to our state and our country, and who feel that they are being discriminated against by this particular tax.

There were three issues that people raised with me. First of all, a lot of people feel that they have already contributed through their health fund and they are getting the bad news, as my son did when I looked at his MBF statement the other day, that despite the ambulance cover being generally made available to Queensland it is making no difference now to their health fund contributions. So people feel they are being done in that area.

Secondly, a lot of people feel that there is no discrimination between a single person, a family or multiple people in a dwelling, that it is not being applied proportionally across the state, and that in fact some people are paying significantly greater amounts than other people per head.

The third issue, which many people have spoken about in this particular debate, is that a lot of people are feeling they have been taxed more than once. Let me just read an extract from a couple of the letters and emails that I have received. One gentleman and his wife made a call to my electorate office, which they later confirmed, about what they considered to be the apparent lack of consideration on the part of the government in developing its latest funding of the ambulance service. They said—

As far as I recall my wife and I have subscribed as a family member to the Ambulance Service in the three states of Australia we have lived in since our wedding 41 years ago. If our membership of the Ambulance Service hasn't been for the full 41 years it has been very close to that period. Our principal place of residence for the last 17 years has been in Brisbane and for all that time we have subscribed to the Queensland Ambulance Service.

These people have been subscribers and they feel that they have contributed fairly over a very long period of time. They have a retirement place up in Bribie as well as their place in Brisbane, and they are going to get taxed on both of those places. It continues—

As I understand it, under the proposed arrangement, families in the same situation as ourselves will now be required to make two subscriptions to the Queensland Ambulance Service. I believe there are a lot of similar anomalous situations such as families who also have a business premise. I am fully supportive of the concept that funding of this wonderful service is an important issue and it makes a lot of sense that the cost should be shared throughout the community. However it seems a bit over the top that we who have stood up for so many years should now be slugged twice because there has been a large proportion of the community who have not accepted their responsibility.

They feel that they have been shouldering the responsibility and others have not. The Premier has identified many other people who have not been contributing in any particular way, and yet the ones who have been contributing are being slugged. The ones who can be identified—the easy marks, if you like—are being taken advantage of by this government.

I wish to raise another issue which is similar to that raised by many members in this debate, and that relates to a person who is in business. It says—

I wish to record with you my disappointment at the proposed method of collecting the above mentioned Ambulance Levy.

Whilst I agree in principle funding for the Queensland Ambulance Service is important I believe the proposed method of funding this Service is highly discriminatory for many electricity consumers who have multiple accounts with the electricity supplier.

I am in the unfortunate position because of a small business venture to be facing the prospect of paying the proposed levy 6 (six) Fold. An acquaintance of mine is facing the prospect of paying the proposed levy 8 (eight) Fold.

This proposal must be regarded as being discriminatory to some electricity consumers and I suggest some form of exemptions need to be implemented to ensure the necessary funding is achieved in a fair and equitable manner.

That sums up the nub of the issue. A lot of people in my electorate feel that they should be contributing to the Ambulance Service and that it does deserve to be properly funded but the application of this tax is simply unfair and discriminatory. It is that issue that they object to. They believe the government ought to work harder to find a method of applying a levy or a tax in a far more equitable fashion. That is the point that numerous constituents of mine want me to make in this debate: that it is unfair, that it is discriminatory and that another method ought to be found. That is the reason we ought to be opposing this particular piece of legislation.