



Speech by

JEFF SEENEY

MEMBER FOR CALLIDE

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COMMUNITY AMBULANCE COVER BILL

Mr SEENEY (Callide—NPA) (Deputy Leader of the Opposition (1.17 a.m.): I rise to make a contribution to the Community Ambulance Cover Bill, which seeks to introduce a new tax—the Beattie government's ambulance tax. It is worth noting for the record that it is quarter past 1 in the morning. At quarter past 1 in the morning we are in this parliament debating yet another piece of legislation to introduce yet another new tax for a government that is clearly broke.

The concept of a new ambulance tax has been debated in this House many times since the idea was first floated in the last quarter of last year. It has been debated many times, but each time it is debated it becomes more and more obvious just how unfair and inequitable it is. Each time we debate it in this House it becomes more obvious to those people who listen to and read the debate just how unfair and inequitable it is. Tonight is no exception.

Tonight we have seen government backbencher after government backbencher stand up and acknowledge just how unfair and unjust this tax system is. We have seen government backbenchers try to have two bob each way—try to address the justifiable and understandable concerns that have been put to them by their constituents and try to maintain the government line. We have seen a parade of them tonight. The member for Fitzroy was the first. Then there was the member for Charters Towers.

Mr Johnson: Trying to save themselves.

Mr SEENEY: They are trying to save themselves. They have one leg on either side of the barbed wire fence, as the member for Toowoomba South said. We saw member after member talk about the representations they have had from their constituents on the unfairness and inequity of this legislation. But then, without exception, they go back to the government line.

The greatest disappointment that every constituent who has made representation to those members should feel tonight is encapsulated in the statement that so many of them made when they said, 'We sent all of their letters off to the minister.' That was the best those members could do for their constituents who are aggrieved by the imposition of this unfair and unjust tax—send the letter off to the minister and somehow console themselves that they have done the job for those constituents.

If those members were prepared to do the job for their constituents tonight, they would be voting with us against this unjust and unfair tax, the tax which they in their own speeches have recognised as being unjust and unfair. They would be over here with the opposition rejecting this unfair and unjust tax on behalf of the people of Queensland who have rejected it, are rejecting it and will continue to reject it in increasing numbers.

This tax was rejected by the local governments right across Queensland when it was first introduced. It was rejected because it was unfair and inequitable, and it was rejected by the people whom the government wanted to collect it. Remember before Christmas when the government tried to give local government the role of collecting this tax and the mayors of all those communities said, 'Like hell, not us. We're not going to do your dirty work for you. We're not going to collect this unfair and unjust tax. You collect it yourself.' The government was not game enough to take the fight on. The government caved in to the mayors because it knew from the start that it was in the wrong.

What happened then? I well remember the night on television when the Treasurer was asked what the other alternatives were, and he mentioned looking at getting the electricity authorities to put it on the electricity accounts. The interviewer said, 'Do you think they will do the same as the local

governments and refuse to collect it?' He said, 'We own them; they can't.' That is the only way the government was able to get this unfair and unjust tax collected; it owns the electricity authorities and it is able to impose the requirement upon those authorities to collect it.

Over a period of time in this House we have seen the minister responsible for Ergon and Energex demonstrate his complete lack of knowledge of this process. How many times has the minister for energy been asked a question about how this tax was going to be collected? How many times has he been asked a question about what would happen when people refused, as they should, to pay this unfair and unjust tax more than once? How many times have we seen the minister for energy stand up and be unable to answer that question? We have seen him get riding instructions from the Treasurer on a number of occasions. We have seen the answers being passed up. The minister for energy did not have a clue how this unfair and unjust tax was going to be collected. The whole idea of having it collected by the electricity authorities was imposed upon him by the Treasurer. I doubt even the Minister for Emergency Services had any idea, because despite the rhetoric—

Mr Malone interjected.

Mr SEENEY: I take the interjection from the member for Mirani. He has never had much idea about anything, and that is fair comment. That is one of the most observant comments that has been made by the member for Mirani.

This whole debate about the ambulance tax, despite the rhetoric that we have heard, is not about providing a better service to the people of Queensland. It is not about providing the world-class Ambulance Service that we had before and that we will continue to have. It is not about that, and that is why the Minister for Emergency Services has not played a role in the debate about this unfair and unjust tax. Just as the minister for energy could not answer the questions, the Minister for Emergency Services could not answer the questions either.

Ms Molloy: Shout a bit louder; I cannot hear you.

Mr ACTING SPEAKER: Order! The member for Noosa will interject from her usual seat. In fact, she will stop interjecting.

Mr SEENEY: The member for Noosa can put her best political attributes into this debate. It would make sure we had a quorum here anyway, would it not?

The minister has had no role. The only person who has had a role in this whole debacle of the introduction of this unfair and inequitable tax has been the Treasurer. That is a clear indication of what we all know. This is about raising extra money for a government that is broke. It is just one in a whole series of initiatives that is designed to raise extra money for a whole range of services that the government cannot fund from its normal income streams. We have a government that is broke, and it is desperate to raise money by any means that it can. We have seen that in the parliament over the last few days. The government's ambulance tax is just one small part of an attempt to avoid ending up in a financial black hole. It should be seen for what it is. It has become apparent that that is what it is on the occasions it has been debated in this House.

It has been clearly rejected by the Queensland community, especially those people who are being asked to pay this unfair and inequitable tax more than once. Some people are being asked to pay it a number of times. Some people in my electorate are being asked to pay it eight, nine and 10 times.

Mr Johnson interjected.

Mr SEENEY: Twelve times, the member for Gregory says, and that is a common occurrence.

Mr Lawlor interjected.

Mr Johnson interjected.

Mr SEENEY: There can be no justification for asking somebody to pay this tax that number of times.

Mr ACTING SPEAKER: Order! I think the member for Southport and the member for Gregory should go and have a cup of coffee. It is late at night—

Mr Johnson: No, I will not have a cup of coffee.

Mr ACTING SPEAKER: I will shout you one.

Mr Johnson interjected.

Mr ACTING SPEAKER: Order! The member for Gregory will cease interjecting. I call the member for Callide.

Mr SEENEY: Thank you, Mr Acting Speaker. The member for Southport likes to sit there and interject, but he never gets on the speakers' list and tells us what he thinks. We never see him on the speakers' list, but he sits there making a nuisance of himself, especially late at night. He gets big and

bold and game late at night. He is an insignificant backbencher who comes in here and gets big and bold and game and interjects—

Mr ACTING SPEAKER: Order! The member will address his comments through the chair.

Mr SEENEY: As I was saying, this tax has been rejected by the many Queenslanders who are being asked to pay it multiple times, and so it should be. One of the sadder things about this debate is to see insignificant Labor backbenchers stand up here and denigrate and ridicule those people who have indicated their angst and their frustration at the unfairness and the inequity of this tax. I do not think the sort of personal denigration that we heard from members such as the member for Ipswich does anything for those members' credibility or for the furtherance of sensible debate on anything in this House. If people are aggrieved and frustrated by the imposition of a tax such as this, they have every right to make their frustrations and their angst known to the government through their local members, and they should be able to do that without being ridiculed and called names in the way that they were here in the parliament earlier tonight.

It is interesting to look at how the legislation addresses an issue that has been raised many times in the House, that is, what will happen when people refuse to pay. Significant groups in the community have made it very clear that they are going to refuse to pay—and more power to them. So they should, in my opinion. When a government tries to impose a tax that is unfair and inequitable, people have the right, I believe, to refuse to pay it in protest. A significant number of groups in the community have made it clear that they are going to do just that. One of the first things I looked for in the legislation was an answer to the question that I asked the minister for energy a number of times about what is going to happen in the situation where people refuse to pay.

We see this absurd situation that is written into this legislation where somebody goes to pay their power bill in a responsible way, and the first amount of money that they pay is taken for the ambulance levy. They cannot even pay their power bill without the government taking the ambulance levy off the top. I question whether that will stand a legal test. I wonder whether the minister has had legal advice on the mechanism that he has put in the legislation. I wonder whether that will stand a legal test. I hope that that is challenged, because if it is not illegal then it should be.

When electricity consumers walk in to pay their power bills, the electricity authority has no right to say that the money is not for people's power bills, that it is for something else. How is that justified? I do not think that will stand the test of a legal challenge, and nor should it, because if it is legally right, it is morally wrong. It is morally wrong to take somebody's money and to use it for a purpose other than what it was paid for. That is what this legislation does. It seeks to take the money that an electricity consumer pays to pay their electricity bill and applies it to another purpose. If that is not illegal it should be, and if it is not legally wrong then it is morally wrong.

There is certainly a community backlash to this unfair and inequitable tax. That community backlash is certainly fuelled by the history that lies behind the imposition of this unfair and inequitable tax.

Ms Nelson-Carr: What community backlash?

Mr SEENEY: 'What community backlash?', the member asks. I would challenge the member who cannot interject from her own seat to stand up in the parliament and honestly tell the parliament how many letters she has had, how many phone calls she has had, how many representations she has had. I hazard a guess that the honourable member, whoever she is, wherever she comes from, and I do not know where she comes from, would have had as many representations as everybody else in this House has had, because the angst and the frustration that has been caused by this unfair and inequitable tax is not limited to any particular place in Queensland. It is felt by Queenslanders all over the state. If my honourable friend has not heard from her constituents, then she has not been reading her mail, and she has not been answering her phone, and she should be, because that is what she gets paid for.

Mr Johnson interjected.

Mr SEENEY: I am not going there. For the record, I do not take the interjection from the member for Gregory.

Before I run out of time I want to make some comments about the history leading up to the imposition of this tax, and it is something that the members on the government side failed to mention. They failed to mention the fact that we are debating this because the Beattie government made an election promise that they could not and did not fund. It was one of those great ideas that everybody would like to do—to give the pensioners free ambulance. It is a great idea; everyone agrees with that. We would all like to give the pensioners in our community a break in a whole series of ways. What the Beattie government did was to promise to give the pensioners a break in terms of ambulance transportation, but they made no attempt to budget properly to fund it. How far out were they? Their election promise was budgeted at \$20 million. It eventually cost \$120 million, rounding up the figures. They were out by \$100 million. That is an example of the financial responsibility and the financial skills

that are inherent in this government that is rapidly going broke, because they have not got any better with their financial management skills since.

How on earth could any responsible financial manager be \$100 million out? To go from \$20 million to \$120 million! It would be one thing if they were 50 per cent out—if they budgeted for \$20 million and it eventually cost them \$30 million—but this government budgeted for this initiative to cost \$20 million. It ended up costing \$120 million, and that is why we are here tonight. That is why the people of Queensland are having this tax imposed upon them, and that is why so many Queenslanders are having this tax imposed upon them time and time and time again in an unfair and inequitable way.

It is no wonder that so many reputable groups within our community are urging their members to reject this tax out of hand, to refuse to pay it, and so they should. I have said to so many of my constituents who have written to me that I believe that they should challenge the legality of the imposition of this tax a number of times. I hope that there is a group in the community that does challenge the legality of this tax. It is unfair, it is inequitable and this parliament should reject it tonight.

Time expired.