



Speech by

Dr LESLEY CLARK

MEMBER FOR BARRON RIVER

Hansard 28 May 2003

COMMUNITY AMBULANCE COVER BILL

Dr LESLEY CLARK (Barron River—ALP) (12.50 p.m.): I do wish to acknowledge at the outset of my contribution to the Community Ambulance Cover Bill 2003 that this is a controversial piece of legislation lacking unanimous community support. However, it is important to remember that what is at stake here is the opportunity for the first time ever to give an absolute guarantee that every Queenslanders will be entitled to ambulance services any time, anywhere across Australia, and they will not have to worry afterwards about how they can pay the bill.

What is also at stake is the opportunity, also for the first time ever, to provide an absolute guarantee that the QAS will have access to a reliable, adequate and predictable funding base. Never again will ambulance officers have to rely on the generosity and commitment of Queenslanders through the voluntary subscription scheme or other fundraising initiatives for financial support to do their job. These are the priorities of the Beattie government—priorities I am proud to support. However, I do acknowledge that the method adopted for collecting the necessary ambulance funds is not ideal and does not have unanimous community support. I have received many letters and emails about this issue from my constituents, who have expressed strong disapproval regarding aspects of the collection method adopted by the government.

An effective ambulance service is critical to every man, woman and child in Australia. It should be funded via the Medicare levy collected by the federal government, but the Liberal coalition in Canberra would not agree. John Howard rejected the Premier's request to go down this commonsense path and we are all paying the price. What is the price? Subject to the exemptions to which I will return later, it is \$88 a year collected from every recipient of an electricity bill. That is \$22 a quarter, 24c a day for the peace of mind of knowing you can access a first-class ambulance service whenever you need it. Sadly, the price is also community dissent and protest, primarily because businesses will also have to pay the levy.

Let me deal frankly with the issue because businesspeople have complained to me about it. Commerce Queensland is coordinating a comprehensive opposition campaign, and just yesterday the business community of Ravenshoe vowed never to pay the levy. It is true that the government could have just billed domestic users, but in that case the levy would have been at least \$100 in order to raise the necessary funds, and if we had retained the voluntary system, families would have had to have paid about \$130. For people on limited fixed income or families with low household incomes who just survive, struggling from week to week, every dollar counts. Therefore the government was faced with the dilemma of conflicting or competing principles. In this instance the government opted to support those who can least afford to pay by introducing this broad based levy rather than a user pays fee for the Ambulance Service—a decision that I support.

In saying that, however, I do not for one moment wish to imply that all people in business are wealthy. I am familiar with enough struggling mum and dad businesses to know that this is not the case. But I also know of businesspeople—as would every member of this House, I am quite sure—who would spend \$88 or more on a meal and a bottle of wine without a second thought, an experience that the battlers of our society will never enjoy.

I do have a problem with this legislation because there will be people who will pay the levy many times with no means of passing on the costs, as has been described. This is a serious problem and it cannot be ignored. However, the number of people in this situation is approximately 50,000 less since the Premier heeded community submissions and representations from myself and other government members and introduced additional concessions. Take, for example, my accountant who works in the same office complex as me. My electorate office occupies two strata title units and my accountant occupies five units, despite a floor area of only some 300 square metres. He was facing the prospect of paying the levy five times. This was manifestly unfair and I could not justify it to myself and took the case to the Premier as an example of the problems with the levy collection method.

The legislation before the House does reflect the feedback from some 600 submissions from individuals, businesses and organisations as well as MPs.

Mr Mickel: What about all the folks who never subscribed at all? We picked them up.

Dr LESLEY CLARK: Indeed, that is right, and those are the people we have been carrying with the system. However, as a result of all of the feedback that we have received and the representations that have been made, the legislation has been changed. A single premises used for a single business or non-residential activity like my accountant's will now pay only once. Caravan park residents will not pay on submetered sites as parks will only pay on accounts held with electricity retailers. The farm shed and pump exemptions have been widened to cover more primary producers; for example, silos and boatsheds used by fishers will be exempt. Church buildings and other places of worship will be exempt unless the electricity account contract includes a commercial activity. Domestic water and sewerage pumps are also exempt.

As well as these new exemptions, those originally proposed have also been maintained. Pensioner concession card holders and Seniors Card holders who qualify for the electricity concession will be exempt from paying the levy on their principal place of residence, and similar arrangements will also be available for Department of Veterans Affairs Gold Card holders. Non-profit organisations which are exempt include crisis accommodation, hostels for the homeless, respite centres, Meals on Wheels and emergency rescue services in addition to churches.

Whilst I have recognised that not everyone is happy with the levy collection method, as many as 412,000 Queensland families will save under the new arrangements, which represents a 10 per cent reduction on the current \$98 family subscription rate. This is also more than 40 per cent less than the projected cost of a family subscription if the existing system had been retained, as I indicated earlier. For single subscribers, their subscription rate would have cost about the same as the community ambulance cover if the voluntary subscriber scheme had been retained. When the electricity bills are sent out in July, cases of multiple billing will come to light, and I hope there will be consideration of further exemptions if they are necessary in order to avoid genuine financial hardship for people.

At the end of the day it should be remembered that we have been forced to adopt a less than perfect method to collect the funds that are necessary for the Ambulance Service. The Medicare levy is still the best method. If members opposite can convince their federal coalition colleagues in Canberra, then Queenslanders will be suitably grateful. To those people who are still unhappy with the proposed levy on principle, not on the basis of their ability to pay, I can only say that the government has acted as it should in the best interests of the whole community.

As I indicated at the outset of my speech, every Queenslanders will now have the peace of mind that comes with knowing that whenever or wherever they need an ambulance one will arrive equipped and staffed to the highest and best possible standard. No Queenslanders need die because they hesitated to call an ambulance, afraid they would be unable to pay the bill. I congratulate the minister on making the changes that are needed to guarantee a properly resourced, effective and reliable ambulance service, and I thank the Premier for responding positively to my personal representations to assist businesses in my electorate. I commend the bill to the House.