



Speech by

# Lawrence Springborg

**MEMBER FOR SOUTHERN DOWNS**

Hansard Tuesday, 31 August 2004

## **COMMUNITY AMBULANCE COVER AMENDMENT REGULATION (NO. 1) 2004**

**Mr SPRINGBORG** (Southern Downs—NPA) (Leader of the Opposition) (4.02 p.m.): I move—

That the Community Ambulance Cover Amendment Regulation (No. 1) 2004 (Subordinate Legislation No. 52 of 2004) tabled in this parliament on 14 June 2004 be disallowed.

I have moved this motion after some considerable degree of consideration. As everyone knows, the Nationals have had some serious concerns about the way that the state government has gone about the implementation of its ambulance levy scheme. We have never had a problem with having a properly funded Ambulance Service. However, it has always been the issue of how we achieve that goal. Unfortunately, the government has taken away a lot of the community confidence and a lot of the support which used to exist for the Queensland Ambulance Service broadly. Back in the days when there was a subscription scheme, people felt a degree of ownership over the Ambulance Service in Queensland. That was indicated and underwritten by the fact that in areas around the state in excess of 90 per cent of people chose to voluntarily be part of that subscription scheme. Nobody had a problem with it. They were generally extremely supportive of it. Over and above that, there were many people who would be more than happy to continue to contribute by way of donation on a regular basis to the Ambulance Service in Queensland. Throughout my part of the world, that used to happen by way of direct cash donations from businesspeople and in many cases, at least in times past, would involve the donation of a bale of wool or the last bullock of the last pen sold on the day at the sales.

Those things have now gone by, and they have gone by for a number of reasons. One of those, of course, is the gradual dismantling of the way that the Ambulance Service in Queensland used to operate and used to be funded. When this government came to power in 1998, it made a very strong commitment—and we accepted that it had a mandate to do this because it actually campaigned on it—to provide free ambulance cover and transport services to pensioners in this state. We had no problems with that because it was the government's policy and we accepted that. We always said from the first day, however, that that was not a properly costed policy. What we have seen subsequent to that time is proof of it. It was costed at around about \$20 million per annum. The cost blew out to just under \$120 million. So the government had to find a way of funding that, and that is where the idea of this community ambulance cover came about.

It is also interesting to note that prior to the 2001 state election the government was saying that it had no intentions for new taxes and charges in Queensland and that it was not considering such an ambulance levy. Straight after the state election it broke that promise and did it. What an absolute shambles that created, because first of all the government was looking to put the levy on rates in Queensland. There was a revolt from the Local Government Association and local governments right across this state individually. That is where the idea of putting it on the electricity accounts of certain Queenslanders came about.

Therein lies a fundamental inequity, an inequity that concerned us greatly from day one. It concerned us greatly, because there are quite a few Queenslanders who are paying on more than one

occasion. These are not just well-heeled Queenslanders; these are Queenslanders who have worked all of their lives who may have a little investment home or a couple of shops as well as their own home. In some cases, depending upon the nature of an agricultural property, there are a number of power accounts which could not be exempted and therefore they have to pay on a number of occasions. So that is where the \$88 ambulance levy came from. The regulation which we are seeking to disallow in this parliament is the one that takes that levy to \$90.20. Some people might say, 'That's only a small amount of money. It's only an extra \$2.20. It's only a CPI increase and the government has a commitment and a policy position of increasing things in line with CPI.' Not everything it does is increased in line with CPI.

If we look at the history of this issue, when was it brought in? It was basically introduced into this place on the day that the state budget was brought down. So there is no doubt that it was used as a cover. It was brought in on the day that the state budget was brought down when everyone was diverted with all of the hullabaloo and all of the hoi polloi over the state budget so that it would not get any attention. It was only in the subsequent day or two that the attention and the focus moved to this issue. This is not just a simple matter of standing up, as honourable members will do later on, and saying that it is a CPI increase so it is a just cause and we can all afford it. If we actually could be convinced that it was delivering us a better Ambulance Service in Queensland, if we could be convinced that it was all going into the Ambulance Service in this state, that there was actually a net benefit to the Ambulance Service and that it was not used in some way to shift other revenue or other budgetary commitments from the government, then we may have a different view with regard to it.

Let us look at the state budget of 2003-04. The estimated actual return for that year was \$92 million for the levy. In the 2004-05 budget the estimated actual return for the levy was \$104 million. So it went from \$92 million to \$104 million or a 13 per cent increase in levy revenue. Let us then go to the Queensland Ambulance Service budget for the outputs—that is, the amount that was actually expended of the overall total budget. This of course includes the levy and the amount that the government makes up out of consolidated revenue and also fee for service. The 2003-04 estimated actual output was \$225.353 million. The 2004-05 estimated output revenue was \$246,189,000 or a budget increase of 9.2 per cent. So it is worth noting that what we have seen is a 13 per cent increase of collections—that is, under this levy—but the increase in expenditure of the Queensland Ambulance Service budget is 9.2 per cent.

So is the money really going where it should be going to ensure that we have a better Ambulance Service in Queensland? I doubt that. A lot can be done with smoke and mirrors. Let us look at some of the other pronouncements from the state budget. The Treasurer said that \$9.9 million would be spent on new ambulances in this current financial year. However, if we compare that to 2001-02, it shows that the state government had spent \$10.5 million on new ambulances. That was three years ago—three years ago. So in actual fact, with a brand-new ambulance levy in Queensland—a brand-new ambulance tax in Queensland—and three years down the track and an estimated increase of 80,000 new Queenslanders each year or a quarter of a million in that time, we have a government spending less, a government spending \$0.6 million less.

So the government spent \$10.5 million three years ago when the population was a quarter of a million fewer. That in itself shows what a shallow policy decision this was. This was all about giving the impression to Queenslanders that they needed a well funded, properly run, professional, First World, high-class Ambulance Service. Nobody argues against that. It is very easy to go out there and con people into thinking that this is a great idea based on that argument. But I ask: how can the government justify spending \$0.6 million less in this budget on new and replacement ambulance vehicles than it spent three years ago when the population of this state was 250,000 fewer?

I turn to the response times for the Ambulance Service. Basically, one would have thought that in the first full year of this ambulance tax in Queensland, things would have been getting better. In actual fact, they have not got better; they have got worse. I have the figures that go back just a few months. They show that 65.9 per cent of emergencies were responded to in less than 10 minutes. That compared to 70.6 per cent four years ago. Surely that is an appalling indictment on the administration of the Ambulance Service in Queensland by this government. I ask members to also keep in mind that that better response time outcome occurred when the Ambulance Service relied on a subscription scheme—a greater degree of community input and support. So one would think that, to overcome that, the government should be spending more on the Ambulance Service in new and replacement ambulance vehicles rather than less.

We need to be convinced that the government is actually spending what it is currently collecting, and using that funding as part of a net significant overall increase, rather than just using it as a chance to sideline or divert the revenue into other areas. That is a very, very real concern of ours. As I indicated, there has been a 13 per cent increase in revenue collections under the ambulance tax and only a nine per cent increase in actual expenditure. The government cannot hide behind the veil of commitment and promises that it is actually using all of this extra revenue to enhance the Ambulance Service and the services it provides to people in this state.

We also need to look at some of the Premier's pronouncements on this matter. In a media release on 18 February 2003, the Premier said that 412,000 families who had previously paid \$98 per year under

the subscription scheme will save significantly under the new ambulance levy. On the surface, that probably sounds right. With this latest increase in the levy, there is now a difference of only \$7.80 between the two fees. The other important point to note is that there will be many families across Queensland who are paying more than once. Many of those people are actually already far more significantly impacted on than they were under the subscription scheme.

I turn now to single subscribers. Under the old scheme, those 230,127 single subscribers paid an estimated \$76 a year. They are significantly worse off. Many of those people are paying more than once, depending upon their own individual circumstances.

So we have a situation in which a number of Queenslanders are paying very, very significantly and very dearly for this government's mismanagement and failure to properly cost a promise that it made in the 1998 state election. Quite frankly, Queenslanders should not be responsible for footing the bill more and more for this government's economic and administrative mismanagement in this state. As well, we have seen this government being embarrassed into providing more and more exemptions under the scheme. We support many of those exemptions because, quite frankly, they had to be made. There was a basic lack of justice and proper foresight into this scheme. That is why the government has to provide many of those exemptions—because it had not thought about those things in the first place.

Basically, we have a hotchpotch policy that has not been put together properly. We will oppose this increase, because we do not trust the government's *modus operandi*. We are not convinced that the government is using the collections that it is already making in the best interests of providing a better Ambulance Service for the people of Queensland. The government's expenditure on essential equipment such as motor vehicles for the Ambulance Service and also reducing ambulance response times indicates that the concerns that we have are justified. We will continue to monitor any further increase that the government proposes for the ambulance levy in this state, because it deserves to be monitored. We need to make absolutely sure that the amount that the government is collecting is going to ensure a net increase to the Ambulance Service of the equivalent amount, not a proportional decrease.