



Speech by

Liz Cunningham

MEMBER FOR GLADSTONE

Hansard Tuesday, 5 October 2004

COMMUNITY AMBULANCE COVER AMENDMENT BILL

Mrs LIZ CUNNINGHAM (Gladstone—Ind) (4.25 p.m.): I rise to speak in support of the Community Ambulance Cover Amendment Bill because it addresses in some way the unfairness of the ambulance tax as it was initially levied, but there is still a way to go. This bill enshrines in legislation issues which previously have been covered by administrative arrangements. It exempts places like public parks, barbecues and toilets. I am sure that every single one of us has local authorities which have been aggrieved by the fact that, in providing public amenities for the community, in the same way that state and federal governments do, they have been caught up in the ambulance levy. It also covers multiple accounts.

I have to say that right up until the time that this ambulance tax was put in place there was no disadvantage to rewiring a house or having additional electricity points in a house involving a new meter's installation because there was no impact as a result of the additional meter. If it was easier, simpler or more direct for an electrician to place an additional meter onto a house—perhaps because of a new configuration of the living arrangements or perhaps because of the way extensions were done and it was easier to put in a second meter—then that is what occurred because there was no disadvantage and there was no additional impost on the landowner as a result of that additional meter. Now the chooks have come home to roost, if members like, in relation to additional meters and this exemption is well and truly welcome.

Additionally, there is now an exemption for war memorials and similar sites. It is a grievous tragedy that they were caught up in the issue in the first place. We regularly stand in this place and talk about the importance of our veterans, whether it is World War I—and they are very much a diminishing group of people—World War II or subsequent conflicts. We have said how valuable these people are, how important our memorials are, how important it is for us as a community to realise, to remember and to pay homage to the sacrifices they have made and then they have had to fight to have their sites exempted from this tax. The extension of this exemption to war memorials and similar memorial sites is welcome.

I refer to family units within houses. Some of the examples included units where perhaps aged parents are staying. I believe that, if everybody in Queensland—indeed everybody in Australia—who is supporting ageing parents either in their home or in granny flats attached to their houses turned over responsibility for the care of those parents or dependent children or dependent relatives to government, the cost incurred would be extraordinary. Being able to exempt them from \$90 a year is a small recognition to give for the wonderful service that these families provide to Queensland and, more importantly, to their own family and loved ones in ensuring ongoing care.

However, there continue to be examples of people who are caught up in the ambulance tax who have a justifiable and defensible position in relation to an exemption. One outstanding person in my electorate—and there are quite a number of them—whom I have written to the minister about on a number of occasions, without success, is John Nixon of John Nixon Communications. John's business pays the levy 22 times. Three of those are for his business premises in Bundaberg, Gladstone and Mackay. The remainder are for unmanned repeaters throughout that sector of the state.

To add insult to injury, he allows—and has done so for a number of years—the emergency services, including ambulance and fire, free use of those repeater towers to enable them to have unimpeded communication. Nixon Communications has unsuccessfully made a number of requests for an exemption from the additional payments, particularly for the repeaters. The Treasurer needs to take a serious look at situations where there are clear and defensible reasons why businesspeople should not have to pay double, triple or—in this instance—18 times the levy for unmanned stations, particularly where they are providing, and have done so for a number of years, a community service. John is not a Labor mate. He would never ever purport to be a Labor mate. Clearly, he would probably be on the other side of politics. However, his contribution to the community is no less important.

I have had contact with a young couple up home who are also businesspeople. I think it will be a long time before the Treasurer allows them an exemption, but they are another example. This young family bought a motel at Boyne-Tannum and have been working long hours to build up the business. They have been hit with multiple taxes. They have been very vocal to me in the expression of their dissatisfaction with the multiple levy. They pay their payroll tax and all of the other taxes that are required of them. I have written to the Treasurer on their behalf and I received the standard letter about supporting the Ambulance Service, et cetera, et cetera—which they already do. They want to see some fairness in relation to the impost of this tax.

The member for Nudgee said that the overwhelming majority of people support the concept of the ambulance levy. I would have to concur with that. I believe that, in all of the electorates, and certainly in my electorate, where there has been some expression of dissent, overwhelmingly the residents concur and support wholeheartedly the concept of an ambulance levy. However, they overwhelmingly support the concept of paying it once, paying it fairly, and paying it transparently.

It has been stated in this chamber that this is a way of ensuring that the Ambulance Service has a clear and ongoing income stream. Well, not too many years ago the income necessary to run the Ambulance Service came out of consolidated revenue. Yes, ambulance boards and ambulance officers did raise money through chook raffles, and the like. Now the LACs do it. I would like to place on record my appreciation of the LACs in my electorate—and there are a number of them—that work tirelessly to provide additional equipment, extra comfort for officers and all those incidentals that the ambulance levy still does not provide for but which the community representatives on the LAC consider essential and necessary for a state-of-the-art Ambulance Service. In effect, the chook raffles have not stopped. Maybe the people who run them have changed, but fundraising in the community continues. The application of the ambulance levy must be fair and equitable and then the community will more open-handedly support the LAC, I am sure, in its fundraising efforts.

I thank the Minister for Emergency Services for coming to Boyne-Tannum and opening the new station at Boyne Island. It has been implied that the station was built with the new ambulance levy. However, it was promised and funded in prior years as a necessary piece of infrastructure for a growing community. Mount Larcom Ambulance Station, also a new ambulance station, was built prior to the tax.

Like many members here, I place on record my appreciation for all the ambulance officers who work in our electorates on a day-to-day basis. Queensland Ambulance Week is a great time to focus our attention on and express our thanks to our ambulance officers. Throughout the year we need to be mindful of the sacrifices that they make. Additionally, we need to be mindful of the sacrifices their families make. In multiple ambulance officer stations it may not be to the same extent, but certainly ambulance officers' wives, husbands and families support these officers in, effectively, a debrief capacity. They support them through the long hours and very tragic circumstances that they have to face.

We also need to remember the special ambulance officers—the dying breed, if you like, of ambulance officers. One officer I would like to mention on the record is Jim Brodie, an officer who retired this year. He worked at Calliope for many, many years—as many years as I can remember. Jim was of the old school. He provided a tremendous service to the residents of Calliope. Young people and older people would go to him with bits of metal in their eyes, splinters in their fingers or feet, or suspected breaks when they did not want to travel in to Gladstone. Since the new roadworks it is only 20 or 25 minutes drive away, but a few years ago it was 30 or 40 minutes away. They would come to the ambulance station and check with Jim and he would tell them whether he felt that they needed to go through to Gladstone. He is and has been a truly valued member of the community. He provided first-aid lessons, he provided support to the Calliope Shire Council and, indeed, to any agency interested in doing first-aid courses.

One service that Jim provided has now disappeared from the Calliope community because we do not have a doctor in residence. The older people in the community would go to Jim and he would check their blood pressure or sugar levels. It could be argued that that is not a core ambulance responsibility. Now that that service is no longer available, I suspect that the older folk still do not go to their doctor or to the hospital; they just sit at home and hope that everything is okay. Jim would check their blood pressure and say 'You need to go off to the doctor'. He would check their blood sugar levels and give them very well-informed advice in relation to their seeking or not seeking medical advice. I am not sure where those people go now because there was a steady stream at the Calliope Ambulance Station.

Congratulations to you, Jim. You deserve a wonderful retirement. You provided many, many years of reliable and valued service to the community at Calliope and, in particular, the Boyne Valley.

I would like to commend the Calliope Shire Council for its prompt response to rural house numbering. With 000, we have had a lot of problems with the reliability of 000 reporting. We are like many rural communities. Joe Bloggs lives at the first turn left after the big gum tree near the white tractor tyre. That is fine if you live there, but if you do not live there, if you are in a call centre in Adelaide, it is very vague instructions. One of the advantages that we lost when we went to the 000 call centre was the local knowledge and understanding of the geography of our rural and remote areas. The 000 call centres do not have that same personal touch. Whilst it may be high technology, there is something missing as a result.

The legislation talks about retrospectivity and it talks about people having to apply. My question to the Treasurer is how will they know about the paperwork that has to be filled in? We had a situation in Treasury in relation to off-road fuel tax where the information was poorly disseminated and two years later people were still being advised by Treasury—which, significantly, could find them—that they now owed back taxes in unpaid off-road fuel tax. However, at the time the tax was actually applied, those same small operators could not be advised directly. My question to the Treasurer is how will people who should be putting in paperwork to claim exemption under this new legislation be advised in relation to their responsibility to put their application in?

I place before the House concerns raised with me in relation to the new EBA and the new manning hours. The hours are two 10-hour days and two 14-hour nights. That will change over time to 10-hour days. I have had concerns raised with me about the adequacy of those hours. More recently, I have had concerns expressed to me in relation to the impact of these shifts on family life. More ambulance officers are required to fill the shifts.

I have raised with the Minister for Emergency Services concerns relating to the secondment of officers from Gladstone Ambulance Station to Rockhampton. That beggars belief because Rockhampton is such a big station and we have minimal crewing levels as regards the Gladstone community, particularly in light of the community ambulance levy. The minister has responded with some statistics, but they have not allayed the concerns of members of the community who are aware of the secondments.

I indicate to the Treasurer, because this has financial impacts, and the Minister for Emergency Services that there are ongoing concerns with the new rostering system. I seek their review of not only the theory but also the reality of the new roster. These exemptions are welcome. There is still a way to go in relation to ensuring equity in the application of the community ambulance tax. I look forward to further amendments to bring that equity to reality.