



Speech by

Mark McArdle

MEMBER FOR CALOUNDRA

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COMMUNITY AMBULANCE COVER AMENDMENT BILL

Mr McARDLE (Caloundra—Lib) (3.08 p.m.): We will be supporting the Community Ambulance Cover Amendment Bill as it moves, in part, to address the inequity the original act continues to impose on many people throughout Queensland. The exemptions contained within the bill are based on commonsense, yet they do not go far enough. They do not go far enough in that the equity the people of Queensland expect to achieve with regard to legislation has not occurred. This legislation has caused ongoing problems to people throughout Queensland, and there are many who are paying multiple accounts and will be for many years to come.

People who are least able to afford it are being required to pay multiple accounts, yet the service they receive is no different from that received by a person who is exempt or paying only one levy. The imposition of the levy has a long history within Queensland and I suspect that, as time goes by, that history will continue to darken until a system that provides equality of cover is achieved. In his second reading speech the Treasurer states—

The government is listening to the community about the community ambulance cover scheme.

This is simply not the case. A large part of the community is being hit with more than one levy, and that part of the community is asking why they should be sectionalised yet receive the same coverage as other members of the community. There is little question that the government is not listening to these people, otherwise the bill before the House today would encompass changes to make equity in relation to those who are required to pay the bill a paramount principle of the legislation.

The Treasurer's second reading speech then states—

The government considers that these changes will help ensure the community ambulance cover works fairly while providing a reliable funding source for Queensland's world-class ambulance services.

The Treasurer's use of the word 'fairly' is inappropriate. That word means in a position that applies evenly across the population. The government could not impose the levy on those in receipt of a pension or benefit as there had been statements made to them that they would not pay for the cost of ambulance transport. However, the government had made no such commitment to the balance of the population. Though there is uniform agreement on the necessity to fund the service, it is inequitable to those who are least able to afford to pay it. To say that the imposition of the levy has been fairly placed upon the shoulders of all Queenslanders is, of course, ridiculous. It is far from fair.

The minister also referred to QAS officers providing 'world-class ambulance services'. There is no question about that. In fact, in a publication titled *Queensland Ambulance Service: A case study in organisational reform* by the Institute of Public Administration Australia, at page 23 it states—

According to Russell Linwood ... the key elements of the QAS ambulance officer ethos are the strong cultural background, the service ethic, pride in doing a good job, and their nurture and care for others. As an example of their humanity, Linwood cited the awarding of 12 Humanitarian Overseas Service Medals to QAS ambulance officers for volunteer service in East Timor, and two for Rwanda, among more than 700 other awards made each year, including bravery awards. More recently, QAS was involved in coordinating the response to the Bali bombing.

That publication occurred in 2002. As I have stated, no-one questions the bravery or integrity of the men and women who work for the QAS. However, there are concerns within the ranks of the QAS, and it is those concerns that are a great worry to me and should be to this government and the public.

As recently as 28 September 2004 the *Sunshine Coast Daily* reported the concerns of officers with regard to their new rostering arrangement introduced 18 months ago. The article states—

One paramedic who did not want to be named for fear of his losing his job said the new rostering introduced at Maroochydore, Caloundra and Nambour stations meant an increasing number of ambulance officers were working under extreme stress and many were simply 'burning out'. The new system replaced two 10-hour day shifts and two 14-hour night shifts with a series of 10-hour shifts.

To make the rosters work you need a lot more staff and the problem on the Sunshine Coast is, they changed before they had the staff, he said.

Now you do up to five or six days in a row and only have two days off and we're coming back bleary eyed.

This, of course, raises some serious questions not as to the dedication or desire of the officers to assist those in need—which is part of the ethos of the men and women who work for the QAS—but rather on the effect of the rosters on these men and women. The minister is equally aware of a number of questionnaires having been sent out by email to officers of the QAS in recent months asking a number of questions in relation to the new rosters. The minister would be aware that these surveys in part were forwarded to Bundaberg, the Burnett Coast, Caloundra, Hervey Bay, Maroochydore, Maryborough and Nambour stations.

The responses of the QAS officers do not paint a picture in which the officers support the new roster system. In fact, many have found it detrimental to their health, their sleep patterns and their family life. This concern in relation to the new shift hours and extended hours of work has some very important effects. Firstly, employees on shiftwork are often required to attempt sleep at times when they would normally be awake. This shiftwork can be considered a biological disrupter, and such disruptions can significantly disrupt performance. Shiftwork can therefore impact on the quantity and quality of sleep and on task performance, and it can create a perceived sense of personal imbalance. Secondly, normal sleeping routines occur at night, but the major difficulty in relation to night-time work is attempting to obtain adequate undisturbed sleep during the day. Over time these disruptions can lead to increased fatigue and decreased performance. Thirdly, work scheduling based on organisational requirement does not acknowledge personal, domestic and social needs. In many cases social workers have great difficulty in maintaining a satisfactory social and family life. This dislocation may result in pressures on relationships, domestic workloads and community activities. Again this impacts upon task performance, health and safety, morale, absenteeism, productivity and attrition rates.

As the article in the *Sunshine Coast Daily* pointed out—and is substantiated by the results of the questionnaire—the current shift arrangements are very negative with regard to the performance of QAS personnel. These are clear concerns that the minister must address if the men and women who perform the tasks that we ask of them in such heroic fashion are to continue to do so for the benefit of all in our community. We will be supporting the bill, but it is wrong to call it fair. It cannot be when we have different categories of payees. The minister must also address the concerns raised by the QAS personnel as a matter of urgency. They are the ones we all rely upon.