



Speech by

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COMMUNITY AMBULANCE COVER AMENDMENT BILL

Mr HORAN (Toowoomba South—NPA) (11.37 a.m.): The Community Ambulance Cover Amendment Bill once again gives us an opportunity to highlight the flawed way in which the free ambulance service for those people aged over 60 was funded and the serious misleading of the people of this state. This service was offered during an election campaign. The government had estimated the cost to be \$17 million. After the election and after a year of the service being offered, we found out that the actual cost was in the order of \$108 million.

Once again we saw the way in which this government operates the finances of this state. We heard it again this morning. There was an off-the-top-of-the-head offer by the Treasurer at a previous session of parliament that compensation would be paid to all of those people who suffered from the dreadful series of blackouts which we probably will face in the future if the system keeps going the way it has been going. We find out today that the Treasurer had not even talked about it with his CEO. This is something that could cost the state hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars. It would have to be funded by increases in electricity prices or funded from Treasury, yet the Treasurer had not even talked about it with the CEO of Engex. How derelict in his duty can the Treasurer be?

Another example is this ambulance levy. This government just went to an election saying that the free ambulance service for the over 60s would cost \$17 million. In the end it cost well over \$100 million, so the new tax was introduced. We have already seen an increase in that tax. We moved a disallowance motion in that respect. The people of Queensland are stuck with this tax, because it is to pay for an unfunded promise and a promise that was not properly researched. Once again, it is the people of Queensland who are slugged. They have to pay this tax that was brought in.

The inequity of the tax is another aspect, on top of the fact that the government had to bring in the tax to pay for an unfunded promise—a promise that was made not based on proper research. Any taxation system should be fair. This ambulance levy is an all-out assault on the small businesses of Queensland. A well-paid professional who lives in a house pays the levy once. A struggling hairdresser who lives in a house and has a little salon pays it twice. The levy will be paid on the house and on the business. Nothing could be more inequitable than the way the small businesses of Queensland have been attacked and assaulted by the unfair application of this levy. Many people who supported the ambulance in years gone by through subscriptions, donations and so on—they have faithfully supported the ambulance—have been hit with this tax many times over because they happen to be in one category of our community; that is, business operators who have more premises than simply their house. People paying the levy only once could be a well-paid professional, a director-general or a senior public servant with investments in shares and so on, whereas those who have a small business get slugged by this levy more than once. I have given the example of a hairdresser. It affects panel beaters and all sorts of other hardworking people. They pay the levy more than once. If they live in a house they have already paid the levy and they are covered wherever they go, so why hit people who have small businesses?

The estimated actual return from the levy in 2003-04 is \$92 million. The figure in the 2004-05 budget is \$104 million. That is an increase of 13 per cent. Yet we saw a budget allocation increase of only 9.2 per cent. Obviously the government is creaming off money—getting more from this levy than it is paying out. In

the 2003-04 budget expenditure on stations was \$14.167 million. The forecast expenditure for the next year is only \$10.65 million, a drop of \$3.5 million. Whilst all of this extra money is coming in from the levy, there has been a drop in expenditure on ambulance stations. In summary, the levy was brought in to cover up Labor Party misrepresentation and incompetence at the election campaign—incompetence in researching and forecasting what the cost would be. It is an inequitable tax. It is unfair on small business. It is a straight-out assault that is an example of the government's don't-care attitude towards small business. Obviously not all of the money that has been raised is going back to the Ambulance Service. The government has pulled in a heap of money, but that has not transposed into a similar increase in the budget allocation.

The ambulance officers at the Toowoomba Ambulance Station do wonderful work. I often have the opportunity to attend awards and functions at that station. Ours is an extremely busy district in an extremely busy area of the south-west region. A major highway goes through the city and there are a number of accidents on the Warrego Highway, which is the road that carries the most freight in Australia. It carries virtually all of the road freight from south-eastern Queensland to the southern states of Australia and in particular to Melbourne and Darwin. All of those trucks go through the city and traverse some 16 sets of traffic lights. Somewhere in the order of 3,500 trucks, mostly B-doubles, go through the centre of our city every single day. There are increasing numbers of coal-hauling trucks coming through from the mines to the west, because Queensland Rail is not able to carry the traffic. There have been some very tragic accidents, particularly on the range. This is just typical of the very difficult work the ambulance officers have to undertake. I commend them for the professional and caring way in which they undertake their task.

I also commend them for a service that has been going for many years now. That is, with a transit bus system they run patients down to the hospitals in Brisbane. That is particularly for those who need cancer treatment. It is a wonderful service. In recent times bus services out of the city have been halved and the price to travel to Brisbane has doubled. This service has made things just that little bit easier for pensioners suffering sickness and illness who have to go to the major Brisbane hospitals for treatment. It is our hope that eventually all of those treatments will be offered in Toowoomba. The hospital built during the era of the Borbidge government has the capability. We simply need to attract the people to staff it. A number of cancer patients have been able to utilise that bus service and it is much appreciated by those older people.

I refer to the Star Care awards for excellence for 2004 for the south-western region, which were presented at the ambulance station in Toowoomba. It is good that the awards are presented in those facilities. It is nice to see the families who attend and the pride they have in their family member who is a recipient of these awards. Many of the award recipients come from Warwick, Gatton and other areas of the region. I congratulate Glen Maule and his staff for the way they operate services in our area.

The awards were presented by Deputy Commissioner Neil Kirby, who spent his early years at the Toowoomba station, and Stephen Moore, who is the acting assistant commissioner for the south-western region. The paramedic of the year was Dennis Walker, the patient transport officer of the year was Chris Neave, the communications officer of the year was Letisha Kahler, the station of the year was Gatton station, the local ambulance committee achiever of the year was Clare McGowan and the support officer of the year was Marion Llewellyn. All of those officers represent various stations in our region. I think all accepted the awards not only on behalf of themselves but also on behalf of their fellow officers in the area.

Ambulance services are just essential in our area. The work of the officers is outstanding. I know that at times they have been under great pressure in terms of the length of shifts. During my time in parliament ambulance officers have come to talk to me about the effects of the trauma. It is something that people do tend to forget. Whilst it might be a regular part of their job, it is very difficult for those of us who do not see that trauma directly to understand the effects it can have. I remember one officer telling me once how many years he had worked and that suddenly at one accident he just snapped, if you like, and found it very difficult to cope any longer. They are like the front-line troops from World War I in terms of the extent and type of trauma and suffering they see and the human comfort they have to provide to so many people. We should always salute our ambulance officers and give them a very sincere pat on the back for what they do and for the way in which they help so many people.

This bill gives us the opportunity to remind this parliament and the people of Queensland about the responsibility of political parties, when they go to an election, to be honest and truthful in the promises that are made—to be honest and truthful about how much they are actually going to cost, not just use those promises to get elected and then slug the community with another unfair, inequitable tax to cover up the blatant mistakes and dishonest representations that had been made.