



Speech by

Neil Roberts

MEMBER FOR NUDGE

Hansard Tuesday, 5 October 2004

COMMUNITY AMBULANCE COVER AMENDMENT BILL

Mr NEIL ROBERTS (Nudgee—ALP) (2.53 p.m.): I am pleased to say a few words in support of the Community Ambulance Cover Amendment Bill because it fulfils a promise of the government to make the community ambulance cover scheme an efficient and effective method of providing a sustainable financial base for our Ambulance Service and of supporting the work that is performed by our ambulance officers. In this instance the government has listened very carefully to the community's issues in relation to the community ambulance cover scheme, which was implemented last year. The proposed changes in this bill will ensure that around an additional 50,000 electricity accounts will be made exempt from paying the levy.

As expected, here today we have heard the opposition, particularly the member for Callide, continue to attack this scheme. The interesting thing about the community ambulance scheme is that it was introduced before the last election. Since that time the opposition in particular has raised issues. It has made this into what it believes to be a major issue. It campaigned heavily on it during the Maryborough by-election. It campaigned heavily on it in the lead-up to the state election and subsequent to it. What has been the judgment of Queensland on that issue since that time? In terms of a rating from one to 10, it has been a zero. The opposition's proposition has been basically rejected by the people of Queensland in terms of election outcomes.

Unfortunately, the opposition just cannot seem to acknowledge that the community ambulance cover scheme has provided the Queensland Ambulance Service, for the first time in its history, with a reliable and long-term revenue stream. Access to a reliable revenue stream is an issue which has plagued emergency services in this state for decades. Before 1991 ambulance services in this state were in a state of flux due to the difficulties faced by local fundraising committees which, as we all acknowledge, worked so hard to support those local ambulance committees that were established throughout the state. Labor abolished the old QATB system after 1991 and introduced a statewide service which, for the first time again, extended the full coverage of ambulance services to the entire state of Queensland. Additionally, at that time we moved to improve pay levels for ambulance officers. We introduced new and improved training standards which led the way for Australia, particularly for paramedics. We also established a career structure for officers to follow. While we had a first-class Ambulance Service as a result of these reforms, the funding stream continued to be an issue and the voluntary subscription scheme was failing to adequately provide the necessary funds for the service.

Unfortunately, the work we started back in 1991 was put on hold during the term of the Borbidge-Sheldon government from 1996 to 1998. The priority that the National-Liberal government gave to emergency services in those two and a quarter years stands in stark contrast to the reforms and effort this government has put into supporting our ambulance officers. Soon after gaining power, the then National Party Minister for Emergency Services, Mick Veivers, commissioned Lyn Staib to investigate the Ambulance Service and report on its needs. One recommendation she made was that the Queensland Ambulance Service needed an immediate cash injection of around \$32 million. However, as we know from history, that recommendation fell on deaf ears in the National Party government.

When we returned to office in 1998 the declining support base for the voluntary subscription scheme continued to be an issue and was putting increasing pressure on the Ambulance Service. Last year the

government made the tough decision to ensure that the service received a guaranteed and substantial revenue stream via the community ambulance cover levy. The funds collected from the levy are supplemented by significant additional funding allocations from the state budget, thus ensuring that the service is now in the best financial position it has ever been in.

Since the establishment of the scheme the government has been able to exempt more than 500,000 electricity accounts from the levy. This bill formalises a number of exemptions that have been put in place since 11 November last year in response to extensive community discussion about the scheme. In that regard I make a special mention of the efforts of the Banyo sub-branch of the RSL, which drew to my attention and ultimately the Treasurer's attention the issue relating to war memorials. I personally thank the Treasurer for his swift response to that issue, acknowledging that it is an issue that needs to be addressed. It has been included in this legislation, and I thank him for that.

Given the constraints on the state's revenue raising powers and the Commonwealth's refusal to fund the service via the Medicare levy, the community ambulance cover levy is the best and most equitable way in which the government can raise the revenue required for the Ambulance Service. Despite the opposition's hypocrisy on this issue, the overwhelming majority of Queenslanders support the concept and principle of having a universal levy in place. This is in spite of the mock outrage of members of the opposition. I refer particularly to the performance of the member for Callide a little earlier in the debate.

The ambulance levy is similar in principle to the application of the urban and rural fire service levies that appear on our rates notices. With these levies, if you own more than one property then you pay the levies more than once. I do not hear the opposition standing in this place suggesting that it would abolish the fire service levy. Is it because the opposition realises it is a fair and reasonable way to raise money for that service? Alternatively, is it because it was the National Party government which introduced that levy in 1984? The opposition National and Liberal parties have been exceptionally hypocritical in their public condemnation of the community ambulance cover scheme. We know that they would never abolish it if they were ever returned to government, just as they would never abolish the fire services levy, which they put in place in 1984.

In closing, I want to knowledge the dedication and contributions made by members of my local ambulance committee at the Northgate Ambulance Station. I want to place on record the current executive members: president Flo Kemley, vice-president Kym Moss, secretary Dea Weston and treasurer David Harrison. Because the former minister is in the House, I want to mention in particular the late Norah Bennett, who was a stalwart of the ambulance committee and many other community organisations in my electorate. I also want to acknowledge the great work of the many fine officers who work at the station under the leadership of the officer in charge, Matt McGregor. They do a wonderful job in working with our local ambulance committee and in delivering a fine service in a caring way to people in need on the north side of Brisbane. With those few words, I commend the bill to the House.