



Speech by

Stuart Copeland

MEMBER FOR CUNNINGHAM

Hansard Thursday, 13 May 2004

FINANCIAL ADMINISTRATION AND AUDIT (PERFORMANCE AUDIT OF HEALTH DEPARTMENT) AMENDMENT BILL

Mr COPELAND (Cunningham—NPA) (10.23 a.m.): I move—

That the bill be now read a second time.

This bill is to amend the Financial Administration and Audit Act 1977 to enable annual independent auditing of the operational performance of the state health department to find out whether the department is economically, effectively and efficiently achieving its objectives, including the delivery of public sector health services throughout the state.

The purpose of this bill is to improve the performance and accountability of the state health department, Queensland Health, to the parliament and to the general public through the provision of independent audit services to be conducted by the Auditor-General, and through the Auditor-General's subsequent reporting of the audit findings to the parliament.

During the 2004 state election campaign, the Queensland branch of the Australian Medical Association sought a commitment from the Beattie government and the National and Liberal parties to introduce independent auditing of the public hospital waiting lists in Queensland. The National and Liberal parties gave a commitment to the people of Queensland and to the AMAQ that legislation would be amended to enable the Auditor-General to schedule performance auditing. The National and Liberal parties' commitment at that time was not as a one-off program, but as a continuing program aimed at enhancing the accountability and responsibility of public sector managers by independently determining whether public sector activities were achieving the desired objectives effectively, and were doing so economically and efficiently, and in compliance with all relevant legislation.

Similarly, the Premier gave a commitment to Queenslanders and the AMAQ that he would introduce an independent audit of public hospital waiting lists. In a press statement released by the Premier on 17 January 2004 he stated—

If we are re-elected, our hospital waiting lists will be independently audited.

The operative word is 'independent'. The government makes hospitals waiting lists publicly available by publishing the quarterly reports of each hospital. However, there is a valid perception that the waiting list data is grossly misleading due to its manipulation to present a better outcome, and there is no better example than the Beattie government's health report, released last year, which was drafted by the Premier's media adviser.

Senior hospital clinicians and representatives of the medical fraternity have been constructively critical of the published data. Last year, Dr Nick Buckmaster, President of the Australian Salaried Medical Officers of Queensland, publicly voiced his concerns and in a *Courier-Mail* article on 17 November 2003 he said that politicians were getting away 'with trumpeting misleading elective surgery figures.' And further, Dr Buckmaster stated—

Most public hospital administrators know how crook it is, but we have a highly politicised health service in Queensland and few administrators make a noise.

Consequently, it is time to take on board the constructive criticism of a system that is failing to deliver the best results for sick or injured Queenslanders. Similarly it is time to eliminate the opportunity for some to engage in creative representations of data, and to eliminate the perception that all is not well with the health system's listings for consultations and surgery.

Queensland Health lacks an external audit process as the mandate to enable the Auditor-General to conduct audits does not extend to performance audits. Incidentally, Queensland is the only state within Australia that does not allow independent performance audits into its health department.

This bill provides the opportunity for the operational performance of the state health department to be independently audited, and independently audited annually. Since 1991, performance auditing has been recommended by the Electoral and Administrative Review Commission, the Public Accounts Committee, and the Sheridan report of the strategic review of the Queensland Audit Office. The government currently engages in systems based performance management auditing. Two key shortcomings with the model of systems based performance management auditing were identified in the aforementioned Sheridan report. Those shortcomings were an independent assurance that adequate systems are in place to enable an entity to assess whether its objectives are being met economically, efficiently and effectively is no guarantee, by itself, that actual performance measures up to that criteria; and an assurance on actual performance by an entity through its responsible minister to the parliament leaves open to question the impartiality of that assurance.

To restore confidence in the public health system, in particular the public hospitals waiting lists and waiting times, and to restore confidence in the public hospitals' managerial accountability, it is time to restore honesty into the health debate and the public hospitals' system of reporting. Independent performance auditing of the state health department will not only assist in the restoration of that honesty, but independent auditing will also provide an environment where impartiality will be beyond doubt. Therefore, independent performance auditing is essential.

As mentioned previously, it is time to listen to the constructive criticism and to eliminate 'creative' presentations of hospital waiting lists and waiting times. It is also time to once again respect Queenslanders who are in need of medical or surgical procedures, and let us collectively depoliticise the health system and assist in getting sick and injured Queenslanders treated on time; let us not continue to perpetuate a system that was colloquially described by Dr Buckmaster as 'crook'. I commend the bill to the House.