



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR SURFERS PARADISE

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FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE AMENDMENT BILL

Mr LANGBROEK (Surfers Paradise—Lib) (7.40 pm): I rise to speak to the Fire and Rescue Service Amendment Bill. The bill will mandate that from 1 July 2007 all homes in Queensland, no matter when they were built, must have installed in them at least one nine-volt, battery-powered smoke alarm. Currently, it is compulsory to have hard-wired smoke alarms installed in Queensland residential homes built or significantly renovated after 1 July 1997.

I echo the sentiments of the honourable member for Mirani, the shadow minister for emergency services, and some of the sentiments expressed by other members about hard-wired smoke alarms and nine-volt battery alarms. The research brief on this bill states that the state government has already installed hard-wired smoke alarms in all public housing, referring to the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service as its source. That is commendable.

The member for Gregory and the member for Gladstone talked about how, in the middle of the night, it is extremely annoying to hear the chirping of a battery smoke alarm that has suddenly given out. When it continues to chirp even after the battery has been changed it becomes extremely frustrating. Often people just take the batteries out and never replace them. That is a problem with the nine-volt battery smoke alarms. I do understand that it is much more expensive to install hard-wired smoke alarms, although I have chosen to install them in my house, which was built in 1993.

The bill is a significant step up in regulation with regard to fire safety, following the mandatory suits of New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. At the end of May it was reported that this year seven people had already died in domestic fires where alarms were missing or not working. Since 2003 fires in homes without an effective alarm have killed 31 Queenslanders, half of whom were elderly or children aged under five. On 9 August the Premier released a statement saying that seven lives had been lost in fatal fires since 30 June, which is a very disturbing statistic.

This is not an issue that the Gold Coast is exempt from. In mid-June, the *Gold Coast Bulletin* reported that one-third of Gold Coast residents do not have a fire escape plan for their homes and 20 per cent say that their home is a fire risk. Those figures come from the 2006 AAMI survey, published in its annual Firescreen Index. Queensland fire service area director Bruce Byatt said that the results indicated that Gold Coast residents had a relaxed attitude to fire safety. In commenting on the results, several experts said that the figures illustrate a distinct lack of fire preparation in some homes on the Gold Coast. In fact, the overriding conclusion of the survey was that Australians are fire confident but underprepared. One in six Gold Coasters admitted to not knowing how to use a fire extinguisher and more than one-third do not leave keys in deadlocked doors for easy escape. The member for Fitzroy mentioned his concerns about people escaping when they have locked themselves in for security reasons. The trends on the Gold Coast were almost the same throughout the country.

Overregulation is never a good thing, but the threat fire can pose to the lives of Queenslanders calls for appropriate regulation to be in place, and I feel that this bill aims to achieve that. With specific regard to this bill's provisions relating to fire alarms, the alarm must comply and be in accordance with specifications relevant to the particular type of dwelling, section 104RB. A person must not remove the alarm or battery or do anything to reduce the alarm's effectiveness, section 104RH. That is a very salient provision as we

have recently heard how the operator of the Childers backpacker hostel had removed a fire alarm from the room where the blaze began because cigarette smoke continuously set it off. Fines of \$375 attach to offending persons in both those cases.

The bill also deals with tenancy situations and liability, section 104RC to 104RG. These mandatory requirements for fire alarms to reduce loss of Queensland lives, injuries and homes by fires are welcome improvements. If personal safety is not enough of a justification for this legislation, the government has pointed out that cost savings are also achieved in emergency services departments as a result of fewer fires.

The bill will also provide new powers for the Commissioner of the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service to require occupiers of identified at-risk licensed premises to establish and implement a safe limit on the number of people who may be in the premises at any one time, which is new part 9A, division 3A. After reading this, the potential for serious injury if a fire were to break out in an overcrowded Surfers Paradise nightclub sprung immediately to my mind. That has happened in other parts of the world. Of course, Surfers Paradise has an extremely high number of nightclubs and this is something that we hope never happens.

Nightclubs and licensed premises are already regulated against the absence or inadequacy of fire prevention equipment on their premises, the number of patrons they can have and the availability of entrances and exits. This may be just a rehash from the Liquor Act and the Building Fire Safety Regulation, but giving the Fire Commissioner a say is common sense. What is new is the requirement for occupiers to establish and not exceed a particular occupancy number.

Further obligations of occupiers of at-risk licensed buildings include ensuring that staff are aware of the occupancy number, implementing a counting system and displaying signs stating the occupancy number. Not that it is problematic here, but this House must remain vigilant that mirroring regulations are exactly that—they mirror—and are not inconsistent or conflicting to take away from the regulations' effect.

The bill includes new provisions imposing an obligation on occupiers of buildings with an automatic alarm system that is monitored by the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service to ensure that the alarm system does not signal an unacceptable number of false alarms. This provision aims to ensure that emergency services are at hand and are not occupied with false alarms when actual emergencies require attention. This provision goes to curb instances where false alarms are caused by alarm systems not being suitable for the type of building or due to the activities of the occupier, section 104DA.

Other new provisions are welcomed, including higher penalties in cases where a breach of fire safety obligations results in death, injury or significant property damage—for example, obligations for occupiers of certain buildings to maintain adequate means of escape from buildings, to maintain prescribed fire safety installations and automatic alarm systems, and to update fire safety management plans—and provision for a right of objection to a requisition notice issued under section 69 requiring a reduction of fire risk, which objection can be taken to a panel established under the act. All in all, the aim of this bill is sound and has my support.