



Speech by

Vicky Darling

MEMBER FOR SANDGATE

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FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE AMENDMENT BILL

Ms DARLING (Sandgate—ALP) (7.52 pm): I rise to commend this bill to the House. This bill will save the lives of Queenslanders. It will also save the property and valuables of Queenslanders and it will save people from the trauma of a fire tragedy. The government has a strong track record of improving fire safety for Queenslanders. This legislation builds on the Building and Other Legislation Amendment Act, which was developed in response to the Childers tragedy and the Sandgate boarding house fire, which occurred in my electorate.

I recall vividly the night of the Sandgate boarding house tragedy. I can tell members that many of my constituents will also never forget it. Three people died that night. I remember vividly lying awake in bed and hearing the sirens as they approached. It was quite frightening. They would be getting louder and louder and then they would stop suddenly just a couple of streets away from where I live. I started counting the number of sirens as they approached. With a pounding heart and a growing realisation that something awful was going on, I got to at least 10 sirens. We started seeing a glow in the sky and we could smell smoke. It was a very distressing situation. Although I counted at least 10 sirens, one thing that nobody heard that night was the sound of a smoke detector going off. There were no alarms of any sort.

Promotion campaigns that have been conducted by the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service have already been successful in increasing the number of smoke alarms in Queensland homes. Now in Queensland, up to four out of five homes have smoke alarms. That is more than double the number of Queenslanders using smoke alarms than there were 10 years ago. However, with 78 per cent of all fire related deaths occurring in homes that do not have smoke alarms, there is still much more work to be done.

Earlier this year, there were three separate fatal fires in south-east Queensland which resulted in the deaths of six people. Fire investigators who attended those fires reported that there were no smoke alarms installed. Since June 2004, fire investigators have reported that 19 people have died in house fires because those homes either did not have smoke alarms or had smoke alarms that did not work, usually because the batteries had been removed or they were dead and needed replacing. That is why this bill is so important. We want every Queenslanders to have a smoke alarm installed by 1 July 2007. Under the Building Code of Australia, smoke alarms are compulsory in homes built after 1 July 1997. Smoke alarms are installed in 51,000 Queensland public housing homes.

Recently, during Fire Awareness Week the honourable minister visited my electorate and helped spread the message about smoke detectors. On that morning a constituent raised the problem of oversensitive smoke alarms and how annoying false alarms can be. There are a range of smoke detectors on the market and many consumers will be able to choose some of the high-tech or the hard-wired models. This bill ensures that installing smoke detectors will be simple and affordable for all people. The battery-only models must be tested regularly, but they are easy to install and, surely, any annoying beeping to warn that batteries are getting low can be tolerated if it is going to save lives. Fire and Rescue Service staff can advise on the best place to fit a detector so that it does not go off too readily.

I offer a big congratulations to our amazing Queensland Fire and Rescue Service because they have been providing this sort of advice for a very long time. I recall as a child—and I will not tell members how long ago that was; it was not very long ago—the fire came to our house and did a full evacuation plan. At the time I had bars on my bedroom window. We changed those permanent bars to the type of bars that you could unlock and the grille would swing out.

Mr Purcell: Smart move.

Ms DARLING: It was a very smart move. My mother was protecting me. There were also some wonderful stickers that the Fire and Rescue Service used to give out that said, 'Fireman, save my child'. You would stick them on the windows of the bedrooms where children slept. I remember having one of those on my window. That was not a bad idea. I encourage people to take up this free advisory service.

Smoke alarms are important, but they are not the full story. We should all develop an evacuation plan and practise it with the family or other residents who are in the dwelling so that they all know what to do in the event of a fire. It is also important for residents to balance security needs with fire safety considerations when installing security. People should not lock themselves in and not be able to get out quickly in the event of a fire. There is a range of security options available, such as that lockable security grille to which I referred, and hiding the key. People have to strike a balance between having security and being able to escape pretty quickly. People should also make sure that their kids know how to get out of the house quickly. This bill is designed to save lives. I commend it to the House.