



Speech by

Paul Hoolihan

MEMBER FOR KEPPEL

Hansard Wednesday, 17 October 2007

MOTION: HEALTH SYSTEM

Mr HOOLIHAN (Keppel—ALP) (6.00 pm): I rise to speak against the motion moved by the member for Surfers Paradise. Apparently he fancies himself as a future health minister. He clearly needs a history lesson in Queensland's health system if he seriously believes hospital boards are a good idea and sound policy. Despite the comments of the member of Callide, we know that it is an outdated, simplistic model that has already failed in Queensland. I endorse the comment made by the member of Algester, 'It is back to the future.'

Hospital boards were an absolute disaster when they operated under Joh Bjelke-Petersen and would send Queensland back to the dark ages if they were ever reintroduced. What happened the last time boards were allowed to run our hospitals? From 1963 to 1980 I worked in Magistrates Courts in a variety of towns and localities—a lot more localities than some of those opposite could even dream about—from Cooktown in the north to Brisbane in the south-east, west to Mount Isa and in central western Queensland.

For the whole of that time we had hospital boards. In many of the courthouses where I worked the magistrate was the chairman of the local board and I acted as his clerk. Most of them had a history of public service and discharged their duties admirably. The problem was not with the chairmen but with the people appointed to be members of the local board. For one, most were financially inept and had no idea about the prudent financial management of health services. They borrowed heavily. I was around when they were done away with. I happen to know a little more about it than the member for Callide seems to know.

They left behind a debt of \$313 million for taxpayers before they were scrapped in 1992. Bear in mind that the Commonwealth proposes a funding body for these new boards. Would that not be an additional unmitigated disaster? Secondly, they were stacked with National Party appointees who did the government's bidding. What will be different under any regime instituted by the Commonwealth or the Queensland opposition?

We have all learned that politicians and political operatives should not in any way interfere in the day-to-day running of our hospitals. What hospital boards will do is create another layer of bureaucracy in our health system. Queensland needs more doctors not more bureaucrats sitting on individual boards. Boards are not going to bring one extra dollar or one extra nurse into our system. They are not going to get one extra patient treated. Boards simply would not work in Queensland's vast, dispersed health system.

The member for Surfers Paradise and others calling for hospital boards would do well to refer back to a major review of our health system by Peter Forster in 2005. Forster's review considered hospital boards and concluded at page 69—

Hospital Boards and separate trust authorities operated in Queensland until 1992 and in later years were found wanting as the scale, size, complexity and need for integration of our health services became more pressing.

He went on to say—

Local Hospital or Health Boards are no longer relevant or appropriate for the management of health services.

Even independent experts agree that boards are not appropriate to manage sophisticated health services—they are from a bygone era. To even suggest that such a broad and a complex range of services in a massive state like Queensland could be run by local hospital boards shows just how out of touch the Howard government and those opposite are.

I am not saying that community involvement is not important. The community does have a crucial role to play in the delivery of our local health services. We already have community input through the formation of health community councils and other bodies but we need the day-to-day running of hospitals left up to health experts, which is what is happening now.

Individual boards would also see hospitals working in isolation. We need to have hospitals working together as a network to overcome challenges and problems, not working in competition. What we do not need is neighbouring hospitals bidding against each other to recruit doctors and nurses. That is why we have districts managing multiple hospitals and clinical networks where doctors and nurses at different hospitals work collectively to drive solutions. Under boards these networks and partnerships would collapse.

What Australia and Queensland needs is national leadership on health with new ideas not ancient policy. Australia has waited 11 years for the Howard government to show some real leadership on health reform. It has taken a federal election for Mr Abbott to finally consider reform and his first idea since becoming health minister four years ago is an absolute dud. Where is his planning, economies of scale and detail to justify hospital boards? The Howard government has underfunded hospitals and failed to supply enough Australian trained doctors and Mr Abbott blames state governments for the mismanagement. It is time for the state opposition to get real when it comes to health.