



Speech by

## Robert Messenger

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

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### QUEENSLAND BUILDING SERVICES AUTHORITY AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

**Mr MESSENGER** (Burnett—NPA) (8.11 pm): It is my pleasure to speak in support of the Queensland Building Services Authority and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2007. Its passage will give better protection to Queensland families and visitors and tourists from defective buildings and the obvious risks that they pose to human life. For that reason I wholeheartedly support the bill.

Part of this legislation was inspired by a tragic event which happened in my electorate more than seven years ago. 23 June 2000 was a very dark day for the close-knit community of Childers. This, of course, was the day that 15 young travellers died in a horrific arson attack at the Childers backpackers hostel. It was not only a dark day for the Childers community but quickly became devastating news throughout the Wide Bay-Burnett region, throughout our state, throughout our nation and, in fact, worldwide. In an instant it turned a quiet, beautiful, small unknown town into a town which is known globally as the place where 15 young lives were senselessly lost.

The tragedy has left its scar on our beautiful town of Childers. But as time has gone by, while the memories of those 15 young lives will never be forgotten, the scars have faded and the community has been able to pick up the pieces and move forward. From a personal perspective I remember that day well. I was used by a TV crew to video the footage. I remember arriving there quite early on that day. I will never forget the shock on the faces of survivors; the way the township rallied around those backpackers. I have to congratulate the whole township of Childers for the way that new relationships were created with the survivors and the victims' families. I acknowledge the leadership of Mayor Bill Trevor, his councillors and leading members of the community such as Wayne Heidrich from Isis Town and Country.

Isis Shire Council CEO, Steve Johnston, put it succinctly when he stated, 'Whilst we will always be known as the town where that fire occurred and 15 lives were lost, we will also be known as a community able to band together, react appropriately and recognise the tragedy with the memorial that has met worldwide acclaim.' I would urge all members, if they are in the area at some stage, to visit the memorial. It is a beautiful and fitting world-renowned memorial that the Isis council has set up in honour of the 15 young lives lost. It is located at the Palace Memorial Building in the main street of Childers.

I think the jewel in the crown is a beautiful portrait called 'Taking a break in the field', which was painted by one of Australia's leading portrait artists, Jo Palaitis. It celebrates the lives and manages to capture the adventurous spirit of young people stepping out and seeing the world. There are also the memory boxes made up of a collage of family images. Since the opening of the memorial over 400,000 visitors have paid their respects.

Importantly, the fire has not deterred visitors, both national and international, from coming to the Childers area and assisting local small crop farmers and investing their money locally. The local small crop farmers depend on these backpackers as there is a shortage of local workers to pick fruit and vegetables. The horticultural industry in the Childers area has gone ahead in leaps and bounds. It is worth around \$300 million to the Wide Bay-Burnett area. Let us compare that to sugar cane, which is probably worth only about \$120,000.

The backpacker hostel fire has led to calls for tighter safety regulations in such high-residency buildings. It is a welcomed, albeit belated, move. This is about ensuring no other tragedy like the Childers backpacker fire occurs again.

The main feature of the bill we are debating this evening is the introduction of an occupational licensing system for fire protection workers. This is as a result of the Building Fire Safety Task Force which was established after the backpacker fire to investigate fire safety matters in Queensland and review the laws for budget accommodation throughout Queensland. The task force declared that there were insufficient fire safety standards to protect the lives of occupants in an overwhelming number of hostels, hotels, boarding houses and other similar budget accommodation buildings.

Currently, there is no legal requirement for fire protection workers to demonstrate specific technical fire protection competencies in order to acquire their contractor's licence. The Childers report recommended that fire protection workers should be covered by an occupation licensing regime for which the BSA would have responsibility. This bill aims to provide this legislative framework in line with the Childers report recommendation.

The Queensland Building Services Authority and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2007 amends a number of acts, particularly relating to the Queensland Building Services Authority Act 1991. Under this bill the major changes with regard to fire protection include: a new fire protection occupational licence which allows a person to personally carry out and supervise fire protection work while he or she is an employee of a licensed contractor, whether it be a company or an individual; a new definition of 'fire protection work', including installing, restoring, repairing or maintaining a fire protection system; preparing a certificate regarding the preceding matters or about whether the system meets standards, specifications or requirements; designing a system; developing, approving or certifying emergency evacuation procedures for controlled evacuations; comprehensive new criteria which must be met when obtaining a fire protection occupational licence; making it an offence if one personally carries out or supervises fire protection work without a fire protection occupational licence or without any other type of licence, registration or authorisation to personally carry out or supervise the work; a provision which will allow a person with the relevant fire protection occupational licence to personally supervise building work.

The bill also addresses the need to increase some maximum penalties after a review of the QBSA Act and the DBC Act carried out during 2005-06 found that some penalties were lenient and there was a need to toughen up on those in breach of the law in order to discourage further breaches. The bill will bring the maximum penalty for anyone carrying out building work without a licence up from \$6,000 for a first offence to \$18,750.

In addition, the bill will expand the range of demerit points applying to offences such as failing to pay a statutory insurance premium or failing to rectify building work under a BSA direction. In closing, while Childers is a close-knit community and has been able to move on from the backpacker fire, it has been extremely hard as the community has been up against further obstacles such as cane smut, severe drought and, most recently, this government's forced council amalgamation plan which has the potential to destroy local leadership and hinder development of small rural towns like Childers. It is a shame that this government refuses to listen to the pleas of my community, which has very loudly and clearly made its objections known. I support the bill.