



Speech by

**Andrew Cripps**

**MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK**

Hansard Wednesday, 10 September 2008

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### **MOTION: PUBLIC HOSPITALS**

**Mr CRIPPS** (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (5.40 pm): It is with pleasure that I rise to second the motion moved by the shadow minister for health, the member for Caloundra. For north Queenslanders and far-north Queenslanders, this motion is timely. This parliament should be very concerned about the mismanagement of Queensland's public hospital system by the Beattie-Bligh Labor government. The motion's focus on the decline in the number of public hospital beds under this government, despite knowing about trends in population growth, is particularly relevant to north Queensland and far-north Queensland communities and our major public hospitals in Cairns and Townsville. For this failure, the state government ought to be censured, as proposed by this motion.

In far-north Queensland, our major hospital is the Cairns Base Hospital. The history of the Cairns Base Hospital is a very sorry story. It should have been relocated and expanded back in the early 1990s, but the Goss Labor government made the populist decision to scrap the relocation—a mistake that even the former Labor member for Cairns, Keith De Lacy, has admitted was wrong—and the people of far-north Queensland have suffered ever since.

The situation in Cairns is at breaking point. A shortage of beds and pressure on staff and resources are having an adverse effect on the welfare of patients. It is a dangerous situation. The problems at Cairns Base Hospital have not occurred overnight. These problems have been building for decades, yet successive Labor governments have ignored the growing needs of the Cairns Base Hospital and the communities of far-north Queensland.

Pressure on the state Labor government has seen a crisis plan thrown together to sell off the Cairns airport to pay for the construction of a new hospital in Cairns's southern suburbs some time in the next decade. A suitable site has to be acquired in the first instance and then the new hospital has got to actually be built. Frankly, the exact nature of what will actually be delivered in terms of the range of health services at the new facility in Cairns is still unclear.

The people of Cairns deserve better. That city is served by four local Labor MPs in Cook, Barron River, Cairns and Mulgrave, two of whom are ministers, but this seems to be of little benefit. Ten years of the Beattie-Bligh regime and the best that this state Labor government can do for the Cairns Base Hospital and far-north Queenslanders is offer a new hospital within the next 10 years.

In north Queensland, our major hospital is the Townsville Hospital. Since the current code yellow crisis began, a routine scenario at the emergency department at Townsville Hospital has been for there to be in excess of 20 people waiting for a bed lying on trolleys in the hallway and ambulances queued in the car park outside the hospital accommodating additional patients. Despite these horrendous scenarios and the fact that Townsville has been experiencing a code yellow occupancy problem, the Minister for Health has denied that the state's public health system is in crisis. There are serious problems at Townsville Hospital which need to be addressed.

Indeed, hospitals across the state are at full capacity. For too long now, the health minister and the state Labor government have sidestepped criticism by blaming the former federal government. It is about time that the state government stopped playing the blame game and complaining that the former federal

government did not train enough doctors and nurses as a distraction to the real issue. It is clear that the cause of the current crisis at the Townsville Hospital is the lack of actual physical hospital beds, and that is clearly a state government responsibility. The minister must stop trying to sidestep this reality.

It is also a desperate excuse that the three local Labor MPs representing the city of Townsville have been relying on as a defence for their inaction. Three senior members of the Beattie-Bligh government—two ministers and a former minister, representing Thuringowa, Mundingburra and Townsville respectively—have been mouthing concern and trying to reassure their constituents that they are doing their best to address the situation. Out of desperation to force them to act, the *Townsville Bulletin* began a petition that has attracted almost 500 signatures calling on them to actually do something to deliver a better public hospital for Townsville. I understand that the member for Townsville, the member for Thuringowa and the member for Mundingburra each have a copy of that petition and have given an undertaking to furnish the Premier with a copy. I hope they also give the health minister a copy because the *Townsville Bulletin* petition really represents the health concerns of the people of north Queensland as a whole.

The reports that Townsville Hospital has been relying on outlying hospitals in rural areas—such as the Ingham Hospital, the Ayr Hospital and the Charters Towers Hospital—to free up space to deal with overcrowding show how desperate the situation is at the Townsville Hospital and how big the failure of the state government is to deliver on the extra beds it promised in 2006. While these rural hospitals are part of the Townsville health district, the Townsville Hospital is the major tertiary hospital for the whole of north Queensland and it simply must be able to operate independently. This motion should be supported.