



Speech by

Andrew Cripps

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

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EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr CRIPPS (Hinchinbrook—LNP) (8.33 pm): I rise to make a contribution to the debate on the Emergency Services Legislation Amendment Bill. The purpose of the bill is to make various amendments to the Ambulance Service Act 1991 and the Fire and Rescue Service Act 1990. The amendments to the Ambulance Service Act are to bring into effect the recommendations of the Queensland Ambulance Service audit report. The amendments propose to put in place mechanisms for dealing with inappropriate use of resources through a framework for addressing false calls and clarify confidentiality requirements for ambulance employees. The amendments to the Fire and Rescue Service Act are to abolish the Rural Fire Advisory Council and to deal with false calls in a consistent manner by reflecting the framework for addressing false calls established in the Ambulance Service Act.

The objectives of the bill are to, amongst other things, give effect to recommendations from the Queensland Ambulance Service audit report by providing legislative support for the expanded scope of the role for paramedics to provide treatment for alternative referral paths where an ambulance transport to a medical facility is not necessary; enhance the enforcement framework to deter false calls by providing for infringement notices increasing the penalty in the Ambulance Service Act to align with the penalty provided for in the Fire and Rescue Service Act and inserting provisions for investigation officers with appropriate investigative powers; abolish the Rural Fire Advisory Council and transfer the functions of that council to the Emergency Services Advisory Council which will combine the functions of the councils and facilitate the integrated delivery of emergency services to the public by the Department of Emergency Services; and specify that the Emergency Services Advisory Council will provide advice on disaster management matters and clarify that individual emergency service commissioners will no longer provide separate annual reports but the Department of Emergency Services will prepare an annual strategic plan covering all of the emergency services.

I would first like to make some remarks in relation to the management of the Queensland Ambulance Service, particularly in relation to staffing and resources, which is certainly relevant to a bill that is discussing the results of the Queensland Ambulance Service audit report. The funding for the Queensland Ambulance Service has been a matter of ongoing contention since the state government introduced the community ambulance levy in 2003. This was meant to guarantee a funding stream for the QAS that would provide for its current and future needs, which have become more and more demanding since this compulsory levy was introduced.

Our ambulance officers work extremely hard in very difficult circumstances and we often hear about those difficult circumstances during various debates in this House. I cannot look past a very serious situation that occurred in my electorate of Hinchinbrook earlier this year when a student paramedic was left in charge of the Cardwell Ambulance Station for approximately seven hours on Monday, 12 August. This situation attracted a considerable amount of public attention in north Queensland and caused concern in the community about the Queensland Ambulance Service. I understand that the officer was rostered on because another officer had called in sick only 20 minutes before the shift began. In that case, and I have been assured by the minister that this is the case, I can certainly understand that that would put the local and regional management of the QAS in a difficult situation as far as finding a replacement qualified

paramedic at such short notice. However, the real concern is that the student paramedic was left to attend the Cardwell Ambulance Station alone and unsupervised for seven hours without being relieved or assisted. That has also been confirmed by the Minister for Emergency Services. That is not acceptable in my view. It was reported at the time that it is a longstanding practice for student paramedics to attend stations alone, although that was rejected by the minister in his correspondence to me in relation to this matter. Certainly such a practice would not be in line with community expectations.

I am concerned that the Queensland Ambulance Service rostering system appears to be very fragile in my region to the extent that it cannot cope with a qualified paramedic at a station calling in sick without resorting to unqualified students to cover shifts. Of course, if it had been the choice between a student paramedic and no assistance at all, I would certainly choose to be attended by a person who had some training. I accept the point made by the minister in his reply to me that the student paramedic involved is due to graduate as a qualified paramedic in December 2008. Technically speaking, the student was not a legally qualified paramedic and certainly was not in August 2008. Therefore, the Cardwell Ambulance Station was officially unattended for that seven-hour period. To his credit, the Minister for Emergency Services acknowledged that the situation that occurred in Cardwell was not ideal and must be avoided. Measures must be taken to ensure that such a situation does not arise again in Cardwell or in any other Queensland ambulance station.

I would like to make it quite clear that I admire the student paramedic who was forced into that unenviable situation in Cardwell in August and I hope that they were not discouraged by the incident. Training to become a professional paramedic as a career choice involves a lot of responsibility. Ambulance officers, indeed all of our emergency services personnel, including police officers, Fire and Rescue officers and SES volunteers do outstanding work for the community and they are to be congratulated and thanked by all of us.

The work of local ambulance committees is crucial for the ongoing delivery of ambulance services to Queensland communities. This is a fact that reflects very well on the commitment and generosity of local ambulance committee members and the communities that support those committees. But it does not reflect very well on the state government that local ambulance services have to rely more and more on LACs to obtain equipment for their local ambulance officers to use on duty.

This situation is spelt out quite clearly in the annual reports of the Department of Emergency Services. Since the 2005-06 annual report was released, contributions from local ambulance committees to the operating revenue of the QAS have more than doubled from \$511,000 in 2004-05 to \$1,267,000 in 2005-06. In 2006-07, the LAC contributions have stayed well above the \$1 million mark at \$1.165 million, and in 2007-08 LACs again contributed over \$1 million to the operating revenue of the QAS with donations totalling \$1,081,000. To their ongoing credit, local ambulance committees have responded to the increasing requirement for them to provide funds to the local ambulance service by more than doubling their contributions in the financial year 2005-06 from the previous year and maintaining those annual contributions above \$1 million ever since. Clearly, local ambulance committees are determined that their ambulance officers should have the best possible equipment and resources which they need to deliver high-quality ambulatory services in the community.

I take this opportunity to recognise the efforts of the very active and dedicated LACs in my electorate of Hinchinbrook, including those in Innisfail, South Johnstone, Silkwood, Tully, Mission Beach, Cardwell, Ingham, Halifax and the northern beaches area of Townsville City, which has an ambulance station at Black River. I know that the ambulance officers at those stations also appreciate the strong support and friendship they get from the LACs.

I turn now to the amendments in the bill that facilitate the abolition of the Rural Fire Advisory Council. Rural fire brigade volunteers do an absolutely outstanding job in our communities. The folding of the management of rural fire brigades into the more broadly based Emergency Services Advisory Council will cause some concern for those involved in rural fire brigades. Indeed, the Auditor-General of Queensland report to parliament No. 3 2008 titled *Management of rural fire services in Queensland—a performance management systems audit* prompted some responses from Queensland rural fire service volunteers in my electorate of Hinchinbrook, which I hope the minister will accept in good faith.

Firstly, the observation was made that the Queensland Rural Fire Service is being funded as a division of the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service. Volunteers in the Queensland Rural Fire Service in my electorate have argued that this needs to change. The Queensland Rural Fire Service previously received its own budget allocation and this was felt to be a successful arrangement. Many of the observations that have come to me are from volunteers in smaller class 1 and class 2 rural fire brigades rather than larger class 3 and class 4 rural fire brigades. The major differences between class 1 and 2 rural fire brigades and class 3 and 4 rural fire brigades are that class 1 and 2 rural fire brigades do not collect levies and are usually made up of rural landowners or are attached to small towns or villages, while class 3 and 4 rural fire brigades regularly collect levies, usually through the local government authority, and have a station for the storage of their equipment. A major criticism of the Auditor-General's report from volunteers

in my area is that it appears to make no distinction between class 1 and 2 rural fire brigades and class 3 and 4 rural fire brigades. Volunteers in my area feel that this is inappropriate when the different classes of brigade are, in fact, quite different in structure, responsibility and capacity.

With respect to the forward planning and risk management comments made by the Auditor-General in the report, the volunteers in my area have commented that the systemic problems experienced in this area of the Queensland Rural Fire Service are due to a lack of administrative support provided to those regional or district committees by the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service. In respect of the brigade funding and resourcing comments made by the Auditor-General, the volunteers in my area have stated that these comments relate to class 3 and 4 brigades only, as class 1 and 2 brigades are not funded. Class 1 and 2 brigades even purchase their own equipment, although some of this equipment is subsidised.

Since the Queensland Rural Fire Service has received its funding through the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service, it is perceived that funding has dwindled. Volunteers in my area have indicated that increased bureaucracy in the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service has seen a greater share of funding used for administration, resulting in less funding for the QRFS, particularly in respect of assisting class 1 and 2 brigades to purchase equipment. On this point particular concern has been expressed by volunteers in my area that larger tanks with the capacity to hold large volumes of water have been removed from the list of equipment available for subsidies for class 1 and 2 brigades. As fighting traditional bush and grassfires requires large volumes of water, this disadvantages class 1 and 2 brigades.

With respect to the comments on training made by the Auditor-General, the volunteers in my area have stated that any move to impose compulsory training requirements for volunteers at class 1 and even class 2 brigade level would be negatively received by existing volunteers and would probably result in a number of volunteers discontinuing their service with little prospect of replacing them with new volunteers. Volunteers in my area have agreed that an appropriate threshold for expecting QRFS volunteers to undertake compulsory training would probably be where the brigade they are attached to collects levies to fund the activities and equipment of the brigade. Such levies create an obligation on the brigade to deliver a standard of service to those paying the levy, which logically may require training of volunteers.

The Auditor-General makes the observation that some Queensland Rural Fire Service brigades are reporting that only 50 per cent of the incidents they attend are traditional bush or grassfires. The volunteers in my area think this reflects the weakness of the Auditor-General's report that I mentioned earlier in respect to the report making no distinction between class 1 and 2 brigades and class 3 and 4 brigades. While volunteers in my area agree that class 3 and 4 brigades may only report 50 per cent of incidents they attend are traditional bush or grassfires, for class 1 and 2 brigades this figure is still in the vicinity of 90 per cent, reflecting the more rural nature of class 1 and 2 brigades.

The volunteers in my area indicate that, in terms of voluntary training offered to all classes of brigades, the nature and extent of training offered should be matched with assessed levels of risk faced by volunteers. For example, volunteers in my area consider the bush and grassfires in southern Queensland, where Queensland Rural Fire Service brigades can encounter crown fires, to be more risky than those encountered by volunteers in north Queensland. I note that the shadow minister for emergency services, the member for Mirani, has indicated that the LNP opposition will support the bill, but I hope the minister will take on board the concerns that I have raised in relation to the QAS and the QRFS.