



Speech by

Andrew Cripps

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

Hansard Tuesday, 2 December 2008

TILT TRAIN ACCIDENT

Mr CRIPPS (Hinchinbrook—LNP) (12.02 pm): At 2.55 pm on Thursday, 27 November 2008, Queensland Rail's tilt train service bound for Cairns collided with a semitrailer at a level crossing just north of the Cardwell Range between the townships of Ingham and Cardwell in my electorate of Hinchinbrook. Two tilt train drivers lost their lives. The truck driver was airlifted to Cairns Base Hospital with serious injuries while nine other passengers were taken to Ingham Hospital with minor injuries. It could easily have been a much more serious accident, with approximately 80 people on board the train at the time. We should indeed be grateful for small mercies.

As I did in the Queensland parliament on Thursday afternoon, I again put on the record my profound sympathies and condolences for the families of the two men who lost their lives in this terrible accident. I certainly hope their families understand that the thoughts and prayers of all Queenslanders are with them at this difficult time. I concur with the observation of the minister for transport in that it is always a tragedy when a loved one goes to work and does not return as a result of an incident in the course of their employment.

I thank the minister for transport for the very decent and generous gesture that he extended to me to travel with him to my electorate last Thursday night to inspect the scene of the accident. The minister and I, accompanied by the CEO of Queensland Rail and the director-general of the department of transport, arrived at the scene of the accident at approximately 1.15 on Friday morning. The scene had been secured by the Queensland Police Service and it had been visited by the coroner, but we were given a preliminary briefing at 1.30 in the morning by Queensland Rail and Queensland Transport staff who had been at the scene for several hours.

At this point I want to recognise the outstanding work that was done by the officers of the Queensland Police Service, the Queensland Ambulance Service and the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service who attended the scene of the accident. I want to put on the record my thanks to the staff of the Ingham Hospital, a number of whom volunteered to come in to work to cope with the influx of patients that was generated by the accident. I also want to express my gratitude to the volunteers of the State Emergency Service who attended the scene of the accident and assisted the Queensland Police Service to secure the site until the Queensland Police Service and the coroner had undertaken their initial investigations. All of this was done in very hot, humid and wet conditions. North and far-north Queensland are presently experiencing their monsoon season and heavy rain hindered the efforts of agencies and authorities undertaking their work.

I am pleased that the minister for transport has advised that a fully independent investigation will be undertaken, chaired by a representative of the Australian Transport Safety Bureau, and that the investigation will be able to draw on the knowledge of technical professionals with expertise in the operation of signals and warning lights at rail level crossings. The inquiries being made by the coroner, the Queensland Police Service, Queensland Rail, Queensland Transport and now by the independent investigation led by the ATSB are ongoing and, like the minister, I will not be making a comment or speculating as to any cause or fault on the part of any party involved in the accident as it would not assist the investigations being undertaken.

As I mentioned earlier, I travelled to the site of the accident with the minister for transport. I hope he accepts what I have to say next in good faith and on the basis that I have a genuine concern about and interest in the incident that occurred in my electorate last Thursday. Level crossing incidents have occurred periodically across Queensland, including most recently on the Darling Downs and now in my electorate. There are approximately 1,800 level crossings across Queensland. It is well past time we looked seriously at doing away with level crossings, firstly, and, at the very least, on Queensland's major highways which carry so much traffic.

The Australian Transport Safety Bureau called for additional warnings for motorists approaching level crossings and in 2003 the National Road Safety Action Plan addressed the issue of level crossing safety. The Australian Transport Council has previously described railway level crossing crashes as one of the most serious safety issues faced by the rail system in Australia.

I understand that funds and resources are always finite and that competing priorities, including competing priorities among different types of transport safety initiatives, make addressing these issues problematic. I would, however, suggest that on the issue of level crossing safety we are behind, given the attention that it has been given by national transport authorities for several years. I seek from the minister for transport an indication about how Queensland will catch up. I believe Queenslanders have indicated their express wish that this occur and that they believe that this issue is a priority.

The minister for main roads has indicated that the upgrade of the northern section of the Cardwell Range will include a road bridge over the level crossing involved in this incident. Given that both the former federal coalition government and the former federal Labor opposition committed to the project during the last federal election campaign, it should be a priority project for the next AusLink package and I commit to working with the minister for main roads to secure the funds for the upgrade of the northern section of the Cardwell Range.