



Speech by

John-Paul Langbroek

MEMBER FOR SURFERS PARADISE

Hansard Wednesday, 16 April 2008

MOTION: MOUNT ISA, DOCUMENTS RELATING TO LEAD LEVELS

Mr LANGBROEK (Surfers Paradise—Lib) (5.39 pm): It is my pleasure to rise to second the motion moved by the opposition leader. I note that the Premier is not here for the debate. I think it is important that at some stage the Premier assures the House, as I attempted to ask this morning in question time, that she will direct her health and environment ministers to not take the information that their departments have gathered over the past five years to cabinet and lock it up under freedom of information provisions but provide it for the people of Queensland.

The Bligh government has ignored a series of damning reports about dangerously high lead levels in Mount Isa for more than a decade despite serious public health concerns, and I will speak about some of those in my contribution. One of those reports is called the Final Report of Mount Isa Mines Limited Panel Assessment Study from February 2001, and I table that.

Tabled paper: Final Report of Mount Isa Mines Limited Panel Assessment Study, dated February 2001.

That is a 57-page report for the minister for the environment. Recent reports have indicated that one in 10 children under the age of four living in Mount Isa suffers potential lead poisoning. Of the 403 children screened for lead poisoning, at least 45 tested positive to elevated lead levels in their blood. The level of lead they registered was well above World Health Organisation standards. Children in Mount Isa are being exposed to a cocktail of metals including lead, copper, zinc and sulfur dioxide. An independent environmental study already referred to by the Leader of the Opposition conducted by Dr Mark Taylor of Macquarie University—and, importantly, it is an independent study, not one commissioned by the government—on 15 March 2007 found that lead levels in Mount Isa suburbs were up to 33 times higher than national guidelines recommend. He also said at page 5 of his report that it is a serious concern that the authorities have known about the extent of contamination since at least 1990—and I table a copy of his report.

Tabled paper: Document, dated 15 March 2007, written by Dr Mark Taylor of the Department of Physical Geography, Macquarie University, titled Summary of Ongoing Research into Environmental Contamination of Soil and Sediment Around Mount Isa, Queensland.

The National Environment Protection Council requires an investigation when lead levels reach 300 parts per million. In this study the level of lead was up to 9,780 parts per million. An environmental audit must be done when copper levels exceed 1,000 parts per million. In this case it was 12,110 parts per million. Also, 7,000 parts per million of zinc usually initiates an environmental audit. The number here was 11,120 parts per million—far above the national recommended level.

The Labor government has known about these problems for more than a decade. In fact, a huge clean-up had to be launched following soil and water tests in 1990. Ongoing air quality monitoring and blood testing was recommended 14 years ago when tests revealed high levels, yet nothing was done about it except for testing about 500 children in 1998 after which the government ceased testing. In 2001 the EPA's audit of environmental conditions at the Mount Isa and George Fisher mines identified the impact on air quality as a major issue of concern in relation to the public health of residents living in the vicinity of the mines. That report was 93 pages, and I table that report.

Tabled paper: Document titled Audit of Environmental Conditions, Mount Isa Mines Limited Agreement Act 1985, Mount Isa and George Fisher Mines, Mount Isa Mines Limited, dated 12-16 March 2001.

We know that the Environmental Protection Agency has raised its concerns about public health with the health minister on a number of occasions over the past decade. In 2006, as reported in the *Australian* on 22 June, a senior EPA staffer resigned in disgust after the environment minister consistently rubbished his concerns about the department's failure to introduce air quality monitoring. The health department is on the record as saying that it has kept a watching brief on dangerous lead levels for more than a decade. Queensland Health staff warned parents not to let their children play in the dirt as well as ensure that kids washed their faces and hands before they went to sleep. They recommended that Mount Isa families clean their houses with mops and buckets to get rid of contaminated dust. Yet they sat on this information and did nothing more about it—nothing more to ensure the long-term wellbeing of residents and their children. There were no mandatory health checks and no ongoing air quality monitoring.

Instead, the Minister for Health ordered a study into blood lead levels, which has taken 18 months to complete. Rather than institute a compulsory testing regime, Queensland Health conducted campaigns and provided incentives to attract enough children. In September last year, as the minister advised us yesterday, the minister knew that more than 10 per cent of the 349 kids who had been tested for elevated levels of lead were turning up concerning results. Despite this, the minister did not take any action until he had collated information from 400 children. Surely this should have been a case for compulsory testing with the parents having the choice of opting out rather than having to opt in.

The health minister justified his actions in this place yesterday by suggesting that he did not have the statistical proof that children in Mount Isa suffered higher lead levels than children living in other parts of Queensland. We say that surely the minister had enough information at hand from this study and the paper trail of reports and studies behind it to know that he had a problem. Rather than that, he has tried to blame parents for their choice to raise children in the region. The health minister has forgotten that these statistics are about young Queenslanders who may be at risk of serious health and developmental problems. I implore the Premier, the Minister for Health, the environment minister and any other member of the Bligh government who knew about this potential public health problem to release the information for the benefit of Queenslanders.