



Speech by

**Shane Knuth**

**MEMBER FOR CHARTERS TOWERS**

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## **NORTH QUEENSLAND FLOODS, QUEENSLAND RAIL**

**Mr KNUTH** (Charters Towers—LNP) (11.40 am): I rise to bring to the attention of the House the very serious matter of the lack of cooperation from Queensland Rail during the recent flooding of the Burdekin River over the Macrossan Bridge. I was employed by Queensland Rail for more than 20 years. I attended many washouts, many floods and a lot of maintenance and bridge and line repairs. During these events we recognised the plight of stranded travellers and those who needed to attend medical appointments and so on in the city. There was a great Aussie spirit as we transferred trapped travellers from one bridge to another. We prided ourselves on our ability to be there to help. We used section cars, rail motors and flat tops to get the job done. This was an automatic and natural response. People were in need and we had the resources to meet their needs.

During the recent floods, the Burdekin River at Macrossan rose to a staggering height of 20.75 metres—the highest reading since 1946. While the Macrossan Bridge was closed, the road between Charters Towers and Mount Garnet was closed and the road between Charters Towers and Clermont was also closed. Charters Towers was isolated except for the still-functioning railway line, which runs parallel to the Flinders Highway. At a time when basic necessities such as medication and food to supply our three colleges, the elderly and the general public were being depleted, Queensland Rail hierarchy resisted appeals for help with freight transport. The local disaster management committee approached Queensland Rail for assistance in a crisis but, lo and behold, QR flatly refused to provide the required help. No-one could understand why QR had developed such a resistant attitude. But since QR has stopped all small freight and now concentrates on bulk haulage, it seemed determined not to help with the carting of small freight necessities, even in the time of emergency.

During the closure of the Macrossan Bridge there was great stress amongst stranded travellers and people needing to keep their medical appointments and catch flights to their destination. Some travellers were stranded for days before being forced to find accommodation and to buy what little food remained in the town. Queensland Rail, however, threatened to prosecute desperate people who attempted walking across the rail bridge to finally get to their destination. Many felt that they had no choice but to risk prosecution and took off across the rail bridge. That was the extent of Queensland Rail's offer—prosecution, no section cars, no rail transport, no support, no contingency plan, nothing! The attitude was, 'We don't transport small freight. The town can starve.'

However, recognising the error of its ways after appeal by the mayor, the state member, the local disaster committee and the media, QR thought it could sweeten the community by providing seven pallets of grog and a lawnmower—which turned up by rail from nowhere! Finally, after sufficient prodding, Queensland Rail finally gave in and sent the basic necessities by rail on Saturday afternoon. All of the time QR was trying to set the perception that it was being helpful, but this is a lie. Trains continued to operate throughout the crisis carrying ballast, so no-one could understand why the basic supplies could not be brought in.

But wait! It does not finish there. *The Inlander*, which was held up at Hughenden, unmanned and unstaffed, passed through to Townsville by stealth in the early hours of Saturday morning hoping that stranded passengers in Charters Towers would not see it pass by. Queensland Rail knew that passengers

where stranded but did not want to fly out personnel at a cost to escort stranded passengers to Townsville. This is a shocking disgrace and a far cry from my days of service in Queensland Rail when we felt privileged to look after people.

It is all right for the state government and Queensland Rail to take a special gravy train to entertain a group of party hacks and pay all expenses to tour Brisbane with drinks and snacks provided and then wind up with a lavish lunch at Roma Street Parkland, but when it comes to a crisis which affects people and their welfare, Queensland Rail is nowhere to be seen. What has happened to the once-proud Queensland Rail that was renowned for its excellent service to Queenslanders? It has become a heartless, profit-making, cost-cutting corporation whose aim is to service the mining industry to the exclusion of the towns and the people who have made Queensland what it is today. I call on the minister to recognise that there has been a downturn in the mining industry and that now is the time to get back to the basics of providing a freight service and looking after people in times of crisis such as we have just experienced in the major floods in north Queensland.