




Speech by

Andrew Powell

MEMBER FOR GLASS HOUSE

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HENDRA VIRUS

 **Mr POWELL** (Glass House—LNP) (11.37 am): Over the past months the sudden and widespread outbreak of Hendra virus across Queensland has turned our attention not only to this terrifying disease but also to its natural host, the flying fox. Some believe the nature of the Hendra disease and the uncertainty and fear it creates for those most intimately affected means we should not be having a debate on flying fox management in this state. True, now is not a time for hysteria or panic, but that is not to say we cannot have a rational debate based on science, or the lack of it, on how we continue to conserve a native animal, one intrinsically linked to Hendra, in our state.

Queensland is home to four species of flying foxes—the little red, black, spectacled and grey-headed—as well as numerous species of bats. In conserving and managing Queensland's flying fox population, a range of interests must be considered—the wellbeing and maintenance of the flying fox population itself, preventing damage to crops and agricultural livelihoods, reducing nuisance in urban settings and averting disease transmission.

The LNP is committed to protecting Queensland's native fauna, including flying foxes. However, an LNP government will work with councils and landholders affected by nuisance colonies to ensure human health and agricultural productivity are not adversely affected. My colleague the member for Hinchinbrook will shortly speak on our concerns as they relate to agricultural production and the biosecurity issues pertinent to the Hendra disease, but let me focus on the broader public health and amenity issues faced by communities with large urban flying fox colonies.

The recent outbreak of Hendra virus has achieved one thing for such communities: possibly for the first time all Queenslanders and indeed many Australians will have seen for themselves, whether on the evening news or on YouTube, what life is like living with large urban flying fox colonies. Let me distinguish here between small colonies residing in the backyards of many rural properties—many of which are welcomed by property owners, even encouraged—and these huge congregations, some far in excess of 100,000, in places such as Charters Towers, Gayndah, Barcaldine and Bargara. The LNP is primarily concerned with the latter. Why? Hendra virus aside—and we acknowledge that there is no scientific evidence of direct transmission from bat to human—these massive urban colonies present significant health risks for the local populations.

Last week I attended a briefing along with the LNP leader, Campbell Newman, and parliamentary leader, Jeff Seeney, provided by the head of Biosecurity, the Chief Veterinarian and the Chief Health Officer. During that briefing we asked the Chief Health Officer whether she could identify any broader health risks for such communities. With little pause, the Chief Health Officer listed a range of diseases such communities could face—namely, lyssavirus, leptospirosis and salmonella.

Put simply, if these communities had colonies of chickens in excess of 100,000 camped in the middle of the towns, defecating and urinating and dropping spats, Queensland Health would deem such a colony a health risk and move them on. The one difference here is that we are not dealing with chickens but with native animals given protection—and rightly so—under the Nature Conservation Act. But such

protection does not negate the need to move such colonies on. This has been proven in Melbourne and more recently in Sydney—and, mind you, not for public health reasons but for the concern that such colonies were destroying the flora in those two cities' botanical gardens. In fact, the proposed relocation of a colony from the Sydney gardens has even stood up in a court of law. But here in Queensland the Bligh Labor government has its head in the sand. Sure, it will tell you that it will issue permits to councils to move such massive flying fox colonies on, but it will delay and prevaricate and impose unrealistic conditions that ultimately render the permit useless while all the time the colony continues to grow.

Communities like Gayndah, Charters Towers and Barcaldine may have taken some solace out of the new environment minister's recent announcement that it will issue longer permits—up to three years—but I suggest not a lot. This Bligh Labor government has no intention of issuing relocation permits to these councils and communities, and it now justifies such on the basis that moving on the flying foxes may unduly stress the mammals, causing them to shed more of the Hendra virus. The LNP is concerned about this possibility, and that is why we asked the Chief Veterinarian that question in our recent briefing. It was clarified and confirmed twice that there is no scientific research on the stress of bats and that officials did not know if there was a link between stress in bats and increased risk of Hendra virus.

The people of Queensland deserve more than uncertainty and prevarication. An LNP government will overhaul the damage mitigation permit system in relation to moving bat colonies. We will give faster approval, we will allow all reasonable means of relocation and we will issue longer permit durations so that councils can quickly act should the colonies seek to return. I reiterate that the LNP is committed to protecting Queensland's native fauna, including flying foxes, but we will also listen to Queensland communities.

(Time expired)