




Speech By
Jarrod Bleijie

MEMBER FOR KAWANA

Record of Proceedings, 3 June 2015

WORKERS' COMPENSATION AND REHABILITATION (PROTECTING FIREFIGHTERS) AMENDMENT BILL

Introduction

 **Mr BLEIJIE** (Kawana—LNP) (4.02 pm): I present a bill for an act to amend the Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation Act 2003 for particular purposes. I table a copy of the bill and explanatory notes and I nominate the Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee to consider the bill.

Tabled paper: Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation (Protecting Firefighters) Amendment Bill 2015 [\[516\]](#).

Tabled paper: Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation (Protecting Firefighters) Amendment Bill 2015, explanatory notes [\[517\]](#).

I present a bill for an act to amend the Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation Act 2003 for particular purposes. The Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation (Protecting Firefighters) Amendment Bill follows on from our public commitment in 2014 when we signed a landmark accord with John Oliver of the United Firefighters Union of Queensland. The bill introduces deemed disease provisions for all Queensland firefighters who contract one of the 12 specified cancers, provisions that are mirrored in the Commonwealth legislation that was introduced by the federal government in 2011. If a firefighter suffers a disease that was deemed to be work related and is listed in the table in the bill and meets the specified time requirements it will be presumed that the disease was caused by that employment for the purpose of a workers compensation claim.

Mr SPEAKER: Member for Kawana, one moment. Members, the member for Kawana is speaking to his bill. If you can please leave the chamber quietly.

Mr BLEIJIE: And we are talking about firefighters, Mr Speaker. If a firefighter suffers a disease that was deemed to be work related and, as I said, is listed in the table in the bill and meets the specified time requirements it will be presumed that the—

Ms Jones interjected.

Mr Dick interjected.

Mr BLEIJIE: Mr Speaker, I am introducing a bill in relation to firefighters with cancer. The Minister for Tourism and the Minister for Health continue their interjections. I ask that you bring order to the Minister for Health and Minister for Tourism. I was talking about firefighters with cancer.

Mr DICK: I rise to a point of order, Mr Speaker. The fact is that the member opposite, and all those members opposite, abused firefighters consistently—

Opposition members interjected.

Mr SPEAKER: Minister, there is no point of order. I would ask members to listen to the member for Kawana.

Mr BLEIJIE: Thank you, Mr Speaker. As I said, if a firefighter suffers a disease that was deemed to be work related and is listed in the table in this bill and meets the specified time requirements, it will be presumed that the disease was caused by the employment for the purposes of a workers compensation claim.

There is a reason why, when surveys are undertaken with Queenslanders about the most respected professionals in our community, firefighters are always at the top of the ladder, if not on the top. That is because the community respects the hard work, the dedication and the sense of service that our permanent, part-time, auxiliary and volunteer rural firefighters have and the innate sense of selflessness that these men and women display on a daily basis protecting lives and property around the state. It is not always about fire events. In a state like Queensland, with the range of wild weather conditions we experience, from wild storms and cyclones to bushfires, floods and drought, firefighters are always there to keep us safe to the best of their ability and to rescue Queenslanders in dangerous situations.

That is why we made the commitment in 2014 that we supported the policy of presumptive legislation for firefighters and today's bill honours that strong commitment. The bill implements changes that other jurisdictions around Australia have adopted to a similar extent and it is time that we joined them in recognising the importance of this change. When someone contracts cancer we need to do what we can to support them as a community. I know that as a member of parliament but also as a son of someone who is a cancer survivor. To the extent that the person has contracted the disease in the duty of keeping our community safe from harm, we have an obligation to do what is right in helping that person through what could be one of the toughest battles in their lives. That is why these changes are so important. Rather than an onerous bureaucratic process of proving the linkage between a disease and work, provided the criteria are met this is simply going to be presumed. This is about making the process so much easier. The last thing someone needs when they are told they have cancer is to then go through a battle to make sure they can take the time for the treatment.

While I note that Queensland does not lead the nation in terms of being the first jurisdiction to introduce presumptive legislation for firefighters, I understand this bill will provide for the highest level of support in any Australian state or territory. I know that the Labor government has talked about this policy more recently, and I look forward to bipartisan support on this bill in good time.

I want to thank John Oliver and his team at the UFUQ, the team at the Queensland Auxiliary Firefighters Association and the Rural Fire Brigades Association of Queensland for continually advocating for these presumptive laws. I also want to acknowledge the former minister and member for Bundaberg, Jack Dempsey, and his staff for the work they did and the consultation and discussions they had on the issues when we were in government. Can I also pay particular tribute to the hardworking firefighters right around Queensland, whether they be permanent, part-time, auxiliary or rural firefighters, for their service to our state.

There are differences in this legislation right around Australia. In a lot of jurisdictions the presumption is applicable to permanent firefighters. We have over 2,000 permanent firefighters and over 2,000 part-time auxiliary firefighters in the state, but we have some 15,000 active rural fire brigade members and also about 30,000 rural fire brigade members of the association. We are talking about a lot of men and women who put their lives at risk for the protection of Queensland citizens on a daily basis.

The difference with this bill compared with other bills is that this bill is nondiscriminatory. A lot of other jurisdictions that have introduced this legislation have a discriminatory clause dealing with rural fire brigades—basically volunteers—where it says that if you are a member of a volunteer fire brigade station and you contract one of the 12 specified cancers, in order to have the workers compensation claim you have to have been exposed to 175 to 200 fire incidents in a period of five years. Today we end the discrimination. This bill that I place before the House today is applicable to permanent firefighters, auxiliary firefighters and rural fire brigade members without any discrimination of the three levels.

There are situations in Queensland where auxiliary firefighters share the same office space and brigades, yet under laws proposed by the Labor Party and in other jurisdictions around Australia if an auxiliary member and a volunteer were to attend the same fire they would be under two different systems and the discrimination rests against the volunteer. Our bill is nondiscriminatory. It will apply to all firefighters. There is a new definition of 'firefighter' for the benefit of the workers compensation legislation.

I thank LNP members who have had input into this bill. It is an important bill that we took to the people in 2014 to protect our firefighters. We announced it with the firefighters union. I pay tribute to the permanent auxiliary men and women of the Rural Fire Brigades Association, who work in all of our electorates. Some time ago, Commonwealth legislation was introduced dealing with presumptive legislation. When we are talking about firefighters at the Commonwealth level, of course we are talking about the ACT firefighters or firefighters based at airports around Australia, because they fall under the federal jurisdiction. State firefighters are not covered by any of the legislation. That ends today with this LNP bill. I know that there are members of parliament from right around the state who are active members of the Rural Fire Brigades Association and today I pay tribute to them as well.

In particular I thank members of the Rural Fire Brigades Association with whom I have had conversations over the past couple of days to ensure that we introduce a bill that is nondiscriminatory, that applies to all firefighters and that gives the protection that firefighters right around the state require and deserve. If a firefighter contracts one of the 12 diseases specified under the bill, the only requirement is that they have served the period prescribed in the bill, which could be five, 10, 15 or 25 years depending on the type of cancer.

I hope this goes some way to showing that the LNP have always and will always support our firefighters in this state. The former member for Mirani, Ted Malone, conducted the Malone review, which gave volunteer firefighters the best support that a government has ever given. I congratulate Ted Malone on the review that he undertook and the reforms that will be undertaken going forward. This is an important bill for Queenslanders and it is an important bill for firefighters, both permanent auxiliary and rural fire brigade members. I commend the bill to the House.

First Reading

Mr BLEIJIE (Kawana—LNP) (4.12 pm): I move—

That the bill be now read a first time.

Question put—That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Bill read a first time.

Referral to the Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee

Mr SPEAKER: In accordance with standing order 131, the bill is now referred to the Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee.

Portfolio Committee, Reporting Date



Mr BLEIJIE (Kawana—LNP) (4.12 pm), by leave, without notice: I move—

That under the provisions of standing order 136 the Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee report to the House on the Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation (Protecting Firefighters) Amendment Bill by 13 July 2015.