




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR FERNY GROVE

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**FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES (DOMESTIC SMOKE ALARMS)
AMENDMENT BILL; FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES (SMOKE ALARMS)
AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Mr FURNER** (Ferny Grove—ALP) (8.05 pm): I rise to make a contribution to the cognate debate on the Fire and Emergency Services (Smoke Alarms) Amendment Bill 2015 and the Fire and Emergency Services (Domestic Smoke Alarms) Amendment Bill 2016. The bills in cognate received 15 submissions for the private member's bill and 16 submissions for the government bill. Some of those submissions were alike and some of them identified issues associated with both the private member's bill and the government bill.

The committee could not reach agreement on the passage of these bills; however, the committee was able to make some recommendations. The first of those recommendations noted the overwhelming evidence supporting the installation of photoelectric alarms and endorsed such. The second recommendation is that smoke alarms comply with AS 3786:2014 and AS 1670:1997. The government members' statement of reservation made five recommendations—

- (1) The committee concurs with the majority of evidence from the many stakeholders and endorses interconnected alarms;
- (2) The committee recommends an alarm be powered by prescribed regulation and be either hard-wired or have a 9v tamper proof lithium battery with a 10 year warranty.

Recommendation 3 concerns the AS number and is essentially covered by recommendation No. 2 in the committee's report. It continues—

- (4) The committee recommends the lessor check alarms at least once each calendar year and within 30 days before any new tenancy;
- (5) The committee recommends the installation of timeframes be provided for in accordance with the Fire and Emergency Services (Domestic Smoke Alarms) Amendment Bill 2016.

In respect of the two bills we differ with regard to the time frames, but I do believe that if you are going to introduce legislation into this chamber you need to do it right. I refer to the key objectives of the 2016 bill. Consistent with the private member's bill, it requires the installation of photoelectric smoke alarms to all dwellings. The report states—

- That legislative amendments be made to mandate the installation of photoelectric and interconnected smoke alarms in every bedroom, between areas containing bedrooms and the rest of the dwelling, in any hallway servicing bedrooms and in any other storey of a domestic dwelling.

The member for Everton covered some of the history of what happened with the Slacks Creek house fire. Hearing of the deaths of so many in that tragedy at Slacks Creek was concerning. The coroner's report made a number of findings in relation to that particular fire and summarised the comments of Chief Superintendent Mr Neil Reid. The report states that Mr Reid indicated—

In essence, the photoelectric alarm responds more quickly to a broader range of fires and is less likely to cause false alarms (meaning people are less likely to interfere with them).

That was the case, unfortunately, for those residents at Slacks Creek. In the past, when my family had ionised smoke alarms, we used to go in and fan the alarms to stop the buzzer from going off. The report continued—

Mr Reid also emphasised the importance of smoke alarms being interconnected, preferably hard wired. The interconnection of smoke alarms means when one alarm operates they all trigger. This provides a loud warning to more parts of the home than would be possible with a single alarm. Mr Reid explained it was important to consider the placement of alarms. In particular, the need for smoke alarms in the bedrooms due to a closed bedroom door ...

The committee found that the only jurisdiction that currently specifies photoelectric smoke alarms is the Northern Territory. In November 2011 they legislated in respect of existing residential buildings. There was a Senate inquiry in respect of this issue; however, the Australian Senate is not in a position to make recommendations on behalf of the states.

A majority of the submitters supported the provisions in both bills that only photoelectric smoke alarms should be permitted. The United Firefighters Union of Australia indicated in its submission—

A typical residential, night-time fire tends to begin in a smouldering stage, where the smoke produced is visible, but cooler and less dense than the smoke produced from a flaming fire. Ionisation alarms take significantly longer, even up to an hour more, to detect fire at the smouldering stage. By the time a fire of this type is in the flaming stage, the level of smoke in the air makes escape considerably more difficult.

In addition to this, ionisation devices are five times more likely to give off a false alarm. In practice, this means that residents are significantly more likely to disconnect their device to avoid the annoyance and inconvenience of a false alarm. This is clearly contrary to the public interest because it leaves residents with no protection whatsoever against night-time fires.

Most of the committee members were informed also of a *60 Minutes* story called 'The Alarming Truth'. I watched the entirety of that program. That prompted me to immediately replace the ionised smoke alarms in my house with photoelectric alarms. It is alarming to watch that story and see that the only alarm that went off during the exercise was the photoelectric alarm, while the ionised alarm did not go off at all. In addition, the REIQ in its submission indicated—

There is a large volume of evidence that photoelectric smoke alarms offer the best detection across a range of fires. Our research indicates they will enhance protection against fire and reduce the risk of injury and fatality in the event of fire.

In respect of interconnection, currently in Queensland smoke alarms in existing houses are not required to be interconnected; however, since 2014 interconnectivity of smoke alarms has been mandated for new homes. Comparing apples with apples, the 2015 bill does not require smoke alarms to be interconnected in existing residential dwellings; however, the 2016 bill does require smoke alarms to be interconnected in existing residential dwellings.

In his findings from the inquest into the Slacks Creek fire the coroner recommended that smoke alarms 'be interconnected by hardwiring where possible and by wireless signal where hardwiring is impractical'. The committee does accept—any reasonable person would accept—that houses can have brick cavity and so on which makes it difficult for hardwiring to be carried out. Now on the market are products that have an ability for wireless interconnectivity. As technology progresses, it will become cheaper and easier for people to interconnect. Assistant Commissioner Reid from the QFES went on to explain—

The issue of interconnection is an important one. The way you get woken up by a smoke alarm is all about the sound level. A smoke alarm will give you 85 decibels within three metres of the smoke alarm. Away from the smoke alarm, particularly in a bedroom with a closed door, you might get as little as 36 decibels at the bed head. It is well known and is documented throughout the world that 75 decibels at the bed head is a requirement to make the average person wake up out of sleep.

Master Electricians Australia noted—

There is little to no cost difference between having hard-wired smoke alarms installed and interconnected compared with battery only smoke alarms installed and interconnected.

Safety Watch Australia indicated to the committee—

With new innovations in wireless interconnection between smoke alarms provides a possibility to achieve a desired outcome but at a heavier price per alarm to the stakeholders. Whilst this sounds like an easy fix, this is reasonably new technology and has yet been proven to be reliable for the life span of a smoke alarm (10 Years).

Conversely, Quickcheck submitted to the committee—

Whilst the interconnection of smoke alarms can provide additional warning to occupants in the event of a fire, our experience has shown that if all the alarms in a dwelling are interconnected and an alarm false activates, the occupants of the dwelling immediately disable all the smoke alarms, leaving the dwelling with no working smoke alarms ...

Of course, with photoelectric alarms that will not cause problems for the future.

I think the committee did an excellent job in examining both bills. I certainly commend the previous members of the committee who contributed to the inquiry as well as the current members. I also acknowledge the secretariat for their excellent work in putting this report together. I commend the cognate bills to the House.