



Speech By
Michael Crandon

MEMBER FOR COOMERA

Record of Proceedings, 31 August 2016

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

 **Mr CRANDON** (Coomera—LNP) (8.17 pm): I rise to make a contribution to the debate on the Fire and Emergency Services (Smoke Alarms) Amendment Bill 2015 and the Fire and Emergency Services (Domestic Smoke Alarms) Amendment Bill 2016, referencing report No. 28 of the Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee. I support the 2015 bill, introduced by the member for Kawana. I came late to this committee and had to play a bit of catch-up, so the first question I asked was why there are two bills. Obviously the first was the member for Kawana's bill, introduced on 2 December 2015. The formulation of that bill was driven by those terrible fires that occurred. Then on 23 February 2016 the Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Services introduced a bill that, in all reality, used much of the member for Kawana's bill and made some changes. After looking at the evidence I can say that the changes suggested in the 2016 bill are worrying. I will deal with those in a little while.

It is worthwhile to state the key objectives of the 2015 bill. It provides that photoelectric smoke alarms will be required in residential premises in Queensland, as they already are in all commercial premises in Queensland. It is not mandated that they be hardwired. Home owners have the option of hardwiring or using nine-volt 10-year lithium batteries.

It is not mandated that they be interconnected. That is also optional for home owners. Houses built after 1 May 2014 already have a requirement for interconnectivity. These smoke alarms would be required to be in a specified location within the residential premises which is the same as it is now. The 2015 bill provides for a staged transition in accordance with the recommendations of the coroner—that is, for dwellings with smoke alarms complying with the law immediately before 1 July 2016, the owner must replace them with smoke alarms complying with the 2015 bill within three years. That is the crux or the cornerstone of the 2015 bill—that is, a three-year time frame. For dwellings with no smoke alarms complying with the law on 1 July 2016, the owner must install smoke alarms compliant with the bill before the first of a transfer of the dwelling, the end of an existing residential tenancy or rooming accommodation agreement for all or part of the dwelling or the start of a new one, or by 1 July 2017. If they are not currently complying, they have to be complying by 1 July 2017.

The report was delivered in November 2014 and of course that report, as has been said already, was driven by those tragic events that occurred in 2011. The new state government came into this place some time after the end of January 2015 and in terms of the bills that were being introduced this particular bill was not exactly a priority. We sat around waiting and expecting something to happen or something to come through given that the report from the coroner was available, but nothing happened. A lot of priorities were being given to unions, with nothing lifesaving in any of that. Rather, we saw all of these union based bills—promises to the unions—being brought through the House but nothing in relation to this lifesaving legislation.

The member for Kawana ultimately drafted his own bill. That legislation is lifesaving legislation. In drafting that legislation, he was ahead of the government and introduced it into the House on 2 December, as I mentioned before. In that respect, he brought his legislation into the House based on testimony from QFES and other key industry witnesses that photoelectric smoke alarms should be the only type of smoke alarm that is the approved alarm for the purposes of residential homes. It was fairly blatant and fairly obvious that that was where we needed to go and that is where the member for Kawana went, and then a few months later the government brought its bill into the House.

It is worth talking about some of the key outcomes of that 2015 bill. Photoelectric smoke alarms would be required in residential premises and those smoke alarms would be required to be in specified locations, and that is very important. The 2015 report states—

The key objective of the 2016 Bill is to improve personal safety in domestic dwellings by requiring the installation of photoelectric smoke alarms in all dwellings thereby reducing the loss of life or injury.

The committee has found that the key outcomes of the 2016 bill are similar but not quite identical to the 2015 bill. We know that both bills call for photoelectric alarms. We know that in both bills the alarms would be required to be in specified locations. We know that both bills come to this House as a result of the Slacks Creek house fire that, tragically, 11 people lost their lives in, as has been alluded to. It should also be noted that the findings from a coronial inquest into a Tewantin house fire which tragically claimed four lives, three of whom were children, that occurred in December 2011 were also referenced in the bill's explanatory notes.

In that respect it is very important for us to understand that the differences are the issue in these two bills. It is the differences that are the issues. We know that the coroner describes the approved smoke alarms and some other matters. Included in those other matters he talks about hardwiring and the use of wi-fi connectivity, and I will come back to that a little bit later. We come to our investigations and the evidence, and this is where we need to understand that the coroner had not undertaken in-depth investigations in relation to the reliability of or what the issues might be or cast inquiries around the broader community to see what might be at issue in relation to some of those things that he said.

Once again, if we look at it, it is three years in the 2015 bill that the member for Kawana put forward and a 10-year phase-in period to 31 December 2026 in the government's bill. As I said, that is the issue. The technical issue is—and my inquiries and other inquiries have suggested—that 10-year lithium batteries may not be capable of connectivity with one another. Remember, we would be doing this on the basis of wi-fi and there is some suggestion that the connectivity of lithium battery run smoke detectors may not be able to be provided and if they are able to be provided then they may not be reliable. That would be of concern to everyone in this House and everyone in Queensland—that is, if you were in bed and a fire occurred and you were confident that if there were a fire the alarm wherever the fire might start would trigger and then also trigger the alarm in your bedroom or the bedrooms of your children. If you are that confident that that is the case, then you are going to go to bed at night and not so much concerning yourself with those potential fires. Obviously they are of concern to all of us, but the situation is this: what if that wi-fi connectivity fails? What if the technology is not that good? We know because we see it here. We see the wi-fi technology in this place fail from time to time.

Mr Power interjected.

Mr CRANDON: This is a very serious issue and I really do not think the member for Logan is accepting how serious this issue is. The situation is that there are issues around lithium batteries and there are issues around connectivity and the cost of connectivity, and that is another matter. I did some research and discovered that we are talking quite significant differences in costs. It was alluded to by the shadow minister earlier that the cost of the interconnectivity using hardwiring and certainly interconnectivity using wi-fi is quite significant. Therefore, many people within the state would delay the addition of these hardwired or lithium battery operated devices until much closer to the end of the 10-year cycle than the member for Kawana's bill puts forward, and that is for it to be in place by July 2017. It must occur within three years or penalties apply.

In terms of the difference in costs with regard to a typical relatively large house, it is somewhere around \$1,400 or \$1,500 to put in sufficient devices plus the wi-fi to connect it—that is, for a three- or four-bedroom house it could cost somewhere around \$1,400 or \$1,500. Hardwiring on a typical one-level, three-bedroom home is something like \$712, with \$400 of that being the cost of the equipment alone.

That is assuming a relatively standard \$80 piece of equipment for an electrician to come and hardwire. We do not even know if that is accurate. I made a comparison with a three-bedroom home and discovered that you could use lithium battery non-connected types for \$540 as opposed to \$1,070 if you have to hardwire. That is where all of those concerns come from. I am talking about cost and reliability.

The final issue that I would like to close on is the issue of false alarms. In our statement of reservation—and it is worth reading—from page 54 we included a comment by Safety Watch Australia in its submission to the 2016 bill. It states—

With new innovations in wireless interconnection between smoke alarms provides a possibility to achieve a desired outcome but at a heavy price per alarm to the stakeholders.

So Safety Watch is supporting that cost aspect of it. The submission states further—

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).

The submission goes on to say—

Should a smoke alarm produce a false alarm event, all... alarms will go into alarm mode. In this circumstance the occupant must locate the individual alarm that has caused the event in order to address the problem and stop the alarms... from sounding. It is our professional experience that the average person has neither the knowledge nor the patience to systematically go through the house to find the offending alarm and, as a consequence, may render each beeping alarm that they encounter unserviceable until they finally address the correct alarm to stop the alarming. It is often the case that batteries are removed and not replaced until the next day or perhaps not at all; in this instance if the batteries are the lithium removable types, it could be a costly exercise to replace any missing batteries. And, in the case that lithium non-removable batteries are present in the smoke alarms the smoke alarms themselves are disabled (rendered non-functional) and would need to be completely replaced. Interconnection has the ability to render a dwelling's entire smoke alarm system inoperable leaving the occupants totally unprotected.

I ask the minister to give serious consideration to this issue. To force through the House this interconnectivity aspect with a delay of up to 10 years for the implementation of these smoke alarms versus no connectivity required at this stage but installation within three years is a no-brainer. At this juncture, the 2015 bill is the one that we should be going forward with. We have to know and be satisfied that the technology is going to work every time. Let us think of these smoke alarms like we would an aircraft. We need to know that, when the aircraft takes off, it is going to land. We need to know that, in all reasonable circumstances, these smoke alarms are going to send a signal to us every single time—and that technology is not proven for that to occur.