




Speech By  
**Hon. Bill Byrne**

**MEMBER FOR ROCKHAMPTON**

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Record of Proceedings, 31 August 2016

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

 **Hon. WS BYRNE** (Rockhampton—ALP) (Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Services and Minister for Corrective Services) (10.31 pm), in reply: I thank all members for their contributions to the debate this evening. As has been pointed out by the member for Everton, with one or two exceptions in the House this has probably been perhaps the most civilised debate that I have been involved in for some years—for a Wednesday night in particular. That said, there have been a number of comments made and I will endeavour to address those as I work through this reply.

All members acknowledge that photoelectric smoke alarms are superior to ionisation alarms. Ionisation alarms are prone to false alarms and are not nearly as effective at detecting smouldering fires which is the type of fire that is most prevalent in residential dwellings. I thank the Queensland Fire and Emergency Services not only for their brave efforts in battling fires but also for advocating for the higher standard of protection that photoelectric smoke alarms will provide Queensland communities.

We have seen too many fire tragedies in this state to approach this legislation in a half-hearted manner. In fact, many of the points that have been raised by members of the House this evening have been points of considerable discussion and thought within the government in the last some months. It is not only the committee that has looked at these issues; I can assure members that there has been nothing raised this evening that has not been a matter of discussion in and around my office and my ministry. The issues have been well ventilated here this evening.

The government's bill reflects the recommendations of the State Coroner following the inquest into the Slacks Creek fire which has been reflected on this evening. It mandates that smoke alarms installed in homes be photoelectric, interconnected, installed in all bedrooms and powered either by hardwiring to the home's electrical system or the use of 10-year-life batteries. I am proud to say the Palaszczuk government has implemented these recommendations in full. A point that we would want to highlight to the House is that we have taken the absolute implementation of the coroner's recommendations fully to heart.

**Mr SPEAKER:** I apologise for interrupting, Minister. I would ask members to not make comments. I am having difficulty hearing the minister. If members want to talk, go outside.

**Mr BYRNE:** I suppose that is the problem with having a civilised debate; I am not ramped up in volume.

**Mr SPEAKER:** I do not need you to be ramped up. I am having difficulty hearing you.

**Honourable members** interjected.

**Mr SPEAKER:** This is not an invitation for cross-chatter.

**Mr BYRNE:** Okay, let us try and keep this where it is. There was a decision made by the government to implement the full recommendations put forward by the coroner. I would like to now address some of the specific issues raised by members within the context of this debate. In terms of the time implementation, the government bill will improve safety immediately from commencement. I know it has been asserted that that is not the case, but it will. On 1 January 2017 photoelectric alarms will be required to be installed in homes any time a smoke alarm is being replaced or a new one installed in any way. The opposition bill, in contrast, introduces no changes until three years after commencement. The other provisions are introduced over 10 years to allow households time to cater for the associated costs and to plan a suitable time to make the changes. Houses sold or entering into a new tenancy will comply within five years. This increases the speed with which the changes are introduced across the community and takes into account the other financial interests in the property occurring at the time. Smoke alarms have a 10-year useful life at which point they should be replaced. Therefore, by allowing 10 years for compliance many homes may choose to comply with the provisions when they would have been replacing existing alarms anyway which decreases any additional costs to them. Allowing 10 years to comply allows time for retail stock and pricing adjustments and helps avoid any artificial increases in trade charges due to a spike in demand.

On the issue of interconnection, smoke alarms can be installed either as standalone units or they can be interconnected so that when one alarm detects smoke all alarms sound the alert. Interconnection is crucial and critical to ensuring an early audible alert rouses a person from their sleep in the event of a fire. Residents asleep in an upstairs bedroom will be made aware of a fire on the lower level due to the alarm in their bedroom sounding. The need for interconnection is closely linked to the need to place alarms in bedrooms. A smoke alarm in a bedroom can wake a sleeping person or resident but only if it is interconnected to the others in the house so that it actually detects the fire at its source.

The member for Everton spoke about an affordable transition and the costs of interconnected smoke alarms. Let us talk about one of the most important components of the coroner's recommendation and the government's bill and that is interconnection. It is far worse to impose a cost on a community with an outcome that does not deliver comprehensively, an outcome that does not save lives to the degree possible. Not only did the coroner recommend interconnected alarms, the Commonwealth Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee recommended the National Construction Code be amended to require installation of interconnected photoelectric smoke alarms in every residential property. It is not just the coroner who has made these recommendations or the advice from our own professionals, it is also coming from a Commonwealth Senate committee. Interconnectivity is the only way to guarantee that parents in their bedroom, and everyone else in the house, can hear if a fire starts in a child's bedroom. This is really important in double-storey homes.

On a technical point, the Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee agreed that smoke alarms comply with the Australian Standard. This standard requires that a sound level is achieved at the bedhead of 75 decibels. The only practical way to reach 75 decibels is through interconnected smoke alarms. The opposition has actually agreed to this. It was one of the two recommendations that were unanimously agreed to. Further, a Victorian university study about the benefits of smoke alarms found that interconnected photoelectric smoke alarms in every bedroom in every dwelling can save up to 50 per cent more lives than the opposition's proposal which has them only in the hallways. Those statistics speak volumes about the importance of interconnectivity.

With regard to the comments of the member for Everton about the cost of hardwired smoke alarms, it is important to note that households have the option of wireless connections. They do not require the services of an electrician, which will significantly reduce the costs for those households. We will also have a package of assistance measures to help families who are doing it tough and those on disability services.

The member for Coomera said that the differences were the issues. What we are proposing is a greater measure of certainty between the option of life and death. If for some reason the wireless interconnectivity fails, we end up with the same system that the opposition is proposing. If a worst-case scenario occurs, the radio frequency fails, for example, the individual alarms will still operate. Encouraging interconnected smoke alarms is simply not good enough. The Queensland Fire and Emergency Services has been advocating and actively encouraging home owners to change their smoke alarms to photoelectric and to interconnect them for years—many years—with very little success. However, mandated smoke alarm requirements achieve 92 per cent compliance.

The opposition has said that a 10-year time frame for photoelectric alarms is too long. Our bill requires rental properties to comply within five years and rental properties make up approximately one-third of all properties in Queensland. Further, any property sold after five years will need to be equipped with photoelectric interconnected smoke alarms. That will ensure more people in more homes will be safer sooner than the 10 years that the LNP is continuing to refer to in this debate.

Another important point that I would like to make tonight is that the member for Noosa has stated that photoelectric alarms should be installed immediately. The government bill requires that any alarm that needs to be replaced from 1 January next year has to be photoelectric, which in fact will ensure that more homes have photoelectric alarms 12 months earlier than the proposed time frame put forward by the private member's bill. This will effectively see the removal of the old style, less effective ionisation smoke alarms from the shelves in retail outlets.

The Palaszczuk government can assert to being a leader in the implementation of residential smoke alarm laws that will afford the greatest protection to the community. There is indisputable evidence that interconnected photoelectric smoke alarms will provide the most accurate and early warning of a house fire. That is a fact. This bill will place Queensland in the best possible position to mitigate and avoid the devastating effects that a house fire can have on a community.

In closing, I wish to acknowledge Louis and Christine from the Logan House Fire Support Network and commend them for their tireless work assisting victims of house fires across South-East Queensland. We have worked closely with Louis and Christine. They in fact believe that the government bill requiring photoelectric smoke alarms in bedrooms and interconnectivity is the best outcome for Queenslanders. Importantly, we have the most comprehensive and protective smoke alarm provisions in the nation.