




Speech By
Aaron Harper

MEMBER FOR THURINGOWA

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EMERGENCY SERVICES REFORM AMENDMENT BILL; STATE EMERGENCY SERVICE BILL; MARINE RESCUE QUEENSLAND BILL; DISASTER MANAGEMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Second Reading (Cognate Debate)

 **Mr HARPER** (Thuringowa—ALP) (4.03 pm): It pleases me greatly to stand up and talk to these cognate bills, particularly for our emergency services in each of our communities. I have been absolutely blessed to have worked with many State Emergency Service members, Rural Fire Service members, volunteer marine rescue services, coastguard and water police—you name it. I was in many situations in my former career with the Queensland Ambulance Service, particularly winching onto some of these boats or retrieving patients in our community, where those emergency services had got there first and were doing a remarkable job looking after the patients. We see them deploy to natural disasters in our state. In North Queensland, we are not strangers to natural disasters.

These changes will enhance delivery of disaster and emergency services in Queensland, particularly as climate change increases the impacts from emergencies and natural disasters in communities. The bills will make legislative changes to reflect recommendations made in the independent review of Queensland Fire and Emergency Services, the IGEM review, the Blue Water Review and a number of others that the committee covered.

I will talk to Marine Rescue Queensland first. Bringing both the VMR and coastguard together under one umbrella is a sensible move. They will be better supported. I heard the member for Maryborough give his contribution on this. We see many of our emergency service volunteers out raising money. To have structure and funding locked in under one umbrella is entirely sensible, and I am looking forward to seeing the Marine Rescue Queensland established in our state. The State Emergency Service Bill 2023 will align both Marine Rescue Queensland and SES under the control of QPS. It formally establishes the State Disaster Management Group within the Disaster Management Act.

My SES group in Thuringowa is ably led by Lewis O'Rourke. Yes, that name is very familiar. He is the husband of the former minister, Coralee O'Rourke. Lewis and I talk together quite a bit. I have an ambition to deliver Thuringowa its own home for our State Emergency Service branch. They are currently joined up with Townsville in a heritage listed building at the bottom of Castle Hill. It is totally inappropriate; it is aged out. They deserve a new home and I will work hard to deliver that for Thuringowa SES.

As I said, I had the pleasure of meeting SES members in many situations and many jobs over the last three decades in my former career. Some of the things they responded to and were first on the scene at were remarkable. I can remember being a station officer at Black River, now Northern Beaches station, in 1995. I shared that facility with the Black River rural fire brigade and the Black River SES unit. Quite often, if I responded to a nasty accident on the highway, they were the first ones there helping

out. I will forever remember that working relationship. I quite often recall that when we meet with them at various functions and they get their meritorious awards for years of unpaid service to the community. Those awards are well deserved. I am looking forward to seeing that established under the bill.

I want to also tackle some of the opposition's comments around lack of process and lack of consultation. We just heard about that from the former speaker. I believe that the Reform Implementation Taskforce is committed to ongoing engagement with SES, Marine Rescue volunteers as well as local communities to ensure successful implementation of the emergency services and disaster management reforms. Since May 2023 they have delivered more than 280 engagement activities with SES and Marine Rescue volunteers and staff transitioning to SES and Marine Rescue Queensland under the Queensland Police Service. Again, it is going to give structure.

The member for Burnett's statement of reservation contained concerns regarding lack of information provided to volunteers—which I have just addressed—and how the new arrangements will operate in respect of the potential compulsory acquisition of equipment and finances of individual SES, Marine Rescue and VMR organisations. I am going to go backwards in time. In 1990 when I joined the then Queensland Ambulance Transport Brigade we had 97 different structures all under separate boards. We had been serving the community throughout many decades. In 1992 we transitioned under a machinery of government to the Queensland Ambulance Service. That was 32 years ago that we changed to the QAS.

We all woke up the next day and the sky was blue, the water was wet and we still had our stations and the community was still respectful of all of those ambulance stations which now have grown to over 230 locations across the state. Back then, QATB was a fifty-fifty arrangement with the community and the state government of the day. To have secure funding to make sure they are getting the flood boats, they are getting the equipment, they are getting the trucks and they are getting the training is all together a very good move by this government in making these reforms and putting our emergency services up where they belong, giving them the training and giving them the equipment that they need. There is nothing scary about that. The entire Ambulance Service went through that reform and continues to operate and has grown bigger over the years.

It is all about volunteers. As members know, I continued to volunteer with QAS from 2015 when I was elected right through to 2022 when I finally retired. It is special when you are doing unpaid work and you are joining with emergency services people at jobs on the road. It keeps you grounded and makes you remember where you came from.

To all of our volunteers out there, no matter where they are located throughout Queensland, thank you for your service. The Queensland government, through these reforms, will ensure you are looked after and that you will have the equipment that you need to respond to communities in times of need in Queensland. I commend the bills to the House.