




Speech By
Daniel Purdie

MEMBER FOR NINDERRY

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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 PURDIE** (Ninderry—LNP) (3.53 pm): I also rise to contribute to the debate on these four important emergency service bills that form part of Labor's urgent major disaster management reforms, even though they were conceived some six years ago. I would also like to pick up on a point mentioned by the member for Lytton, who spoke prior to me. She was belittling people who were being critical of the lack of consultation conducted during the development of this bill. I point out that the Community Support and Services Committee, which reviewed these bills, heard from 20 submitters, and the theme through a lot of those submissions was criticism of the government for the lack of transparency and consultation on these bills. I and my colleagues on this side of the House will support all of those stakeholders and submitters in this important disaster management space who openly and, quite rightly, criticised the government. I condemn the previous speaker, the member for Lytton, for belittling and criticising those stakeholders for raising that issue.

The cognate debate includes the Emergency Services Reform Amendment Bill 2023, the State Emergency Service Bill 2023, the Marine Rescue Queensland Bill 2023 and the Disaster Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024. I thank my colleague the member for Burdekin for his in-depth analysis. He earlier shared his views and the views of stakeholders and asked a number of legitimate questions that stakeholders have asked us to raise in this place. I do not intend to ask those same questions, but I support his foreshadowing of our opposition to clause 31.

Forgive me for stating the obvious but there has been a lot of muddy water under the bridge and many fires at our doors since Labor realised in 2018 that Queensland needed a more cohesive disaster management approach. Queensland is prone to widespread, multiple natural disasters. In fact, we have the most occurrences in the country.

Disaster management is mostly a ground-up operation—the first eyes that raise the alert and the first feet on the ground are our first responders and they are usually the ones fighting imminent danger while simultaneously sending out the call for more help. Our volunteer emergency service workers number in the hundreds of thousands. In this state, we would be weak and vulnerable without them when facing Mother Nature and human misadventure. As Queenslanders, we trust and are proud of our emergency and disaster management workforce and we must have faith in the government's ability to lead the complex intergovernmental and interagency communication and coordination of resources across all of the helping hands and angels in the night in order to protect our families and communities from harm both through and post disasters.

The 2018-20 Blue Water Review into maritime rescue services and the 2021 review into the scope, function and structure of the QFES precipitated a raft of recommendations by the government to tighten the ship, so to speak. At a cost of more than \$27 million, which is nearly four times the annual

operating cost of Marine Rescue Queensland, the review was a start and it paved the way for ample resources and time for meaningful consultation and engagement from all involved. My fear, and the reservation of my colleagues and stakeholders who may be late to detailed and tasky conversations, is that a lack of inclusivity when merging different cultures could derail the effort. If we cannot bring these two together and protect the culture and altruism of volunteerism, the success of this merger—though logical and responsible in nature—will be threatened. We will not know until we are in the trenches to some degree.

These reforms seek to: address the function, structure, culture, efficiency, funding and sustainability of Queensland's disaster management services; modernise service delivery arrangements; simplify operational structures; and focus resources. This has meant the volunteer workforce, such as the SES, marine rescue and coastguard, will merge with a highly regimented structure—the Queensland Police Service. It is particularly important that regulatory changes are made clear, that actions and responsibilities are delineated and that scalable sets of arrangements be in play to not only achieve efficiencies but also save lives.

On 28 April 2023, the disaster management group was established under the Disaster Management Act 2003 with the Queensland Police Commissioner in charge. The restructure to emergency service will be achieved by: establishing Marine Rescue Queensland, MRQ, as a statewide marine rescue service through the Marine Rescue Queensland Bill; combining the Australian Volunteer Coast Guard and the volunteer marine rescue associations into one entity; establishing the SES through the State Emergency Service Bill 2003; aligning MRQ and SES under the control of the QPS through the Emergency Services Reform Amendment Bill, which will make the necessary administrative and consequential amendments for this to occur; formally establishing the State Disaster Management Group—SDM Group—within the state Disaster Management Act through the Emergency Services Reform Amendment Bill; appointing the QPS Commissioner as CEO to connect federal, state and local agencies to planning, guidelines and frameworks; and establishing the Queensland Fire and Rescue and Rural Fire Service Queensland as two separate fire services housed within the Queensland Fire Department.

In theory, these four bills aim to emphasise the value of each organisation, promote volunteer engagement and provide a framework that outlines the purpose, functions and command structure of each organisation and the roles of their members. However, while the LNP will not be opposing the bills, it would be remiss of me not to flag the concerns raised in relation to the Disaster Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill by members of many of my local rural fire brigades operating on the Sunshine Coast. First and foremost has been the haste in rushing this legislation through parliament. The limited time for consultation across the large, extensive volunteer base has meant the process for meaningful engagement and discussion has been impeded.

The original focus of the legislative reforms around the structure, operation and funding for the Rural Fire Service is significantly different to what is now being proposed, and combined with the limited opportunity for consultation has meant many volunteers have been left feeling disengaged and as though their voices were not heard and their concerns were not addressed. In relation to the first three bills and their connection to each other, the Community Support and Services Committee resolved to align key engagement activities in relation to its examination of them, including receiving a total of 20 submissions, a public briefing from the QPS on 12 February 2024 and a public hearing on 4 March. One of the committee's recommendations was to the QPS Reform Implementation Taskforce to undertake public education information sessions to engage and inform SES and MSQ volunteers so as not to disenfranchise them. Generally, submitters were supportive of the bill, albeit the lack of consultation was raised a number of times.

The LNP fully supports any attempt to improve the emergency response of agencies and volunteer groups for regular operations and disaster management. The cost will be in the vicinity of \$10 million over two years to the Reform Implementation Taskforce and \$142 million per annum ongoing to be distributed to the SES, MRQ, extra disaster management functions of the QPS, an extra 143 firefighters, corporate support, the Queensland Reconstruction Authority and other supports. I do have concerns about how additional functions being brought under the umbrella of the QPS may impact their core functions, particularly when QPS numbers are already at all-time critical lows. At the public briefing, the QPS acting assistant commissioner, Marcus Hill, stated—

The reforms will bring almost 8,000 volunteers—

being VMR and SES volunteers—

under the police umbrella as well as staff members. This will require the development of additional capability and capacity within the organisation.

We must not forget—in fact, we must protect—our emergency service volunteers, including our SES and rural firefighters who run to danger without a pay packet to compensate them. Last year in Queensland, SES volunteers conducted more than 92,000 hours in operational tasking and 330,000 hours in training, admin, public education, recruitment, fundraising and equipment maintenance.

In my electorate, I am proud of the Coolum SES, which has have been led by the same resolute and dedicated leader for the past 40 years, Mr Brendan Jones. Brendan was recognised for his outstanding service and was presented with his life membership last year. He was humbled, as many of our unsung heroes are, and simply said in an interview with the local *Coolum Advertiser* that he joined the SES because he figured 'it wasn't rocket science to give back to the community'. Well, it may not be rocket science, but it is so much more than that to our local community. Giving back to the community is what drives our volunteers and it is quintessentially Australian. Selflessly, they sign up for service and sacrifice, putting their lives on the line to protect others. Frontline workers and volunteers deserve to feel respected, heard, valued and prioritised, because their work binds us together and keeps our human spirit alive.

I am also extremely proud of the many volunteer rural firefighters across my electorate, including the brigades of Bli Bli, Eumundi, Maroochy River, Doonan, Verrierdale, Kiel Mountain and Yandina North Arm. Many of these volunteers were part of the first responders when fire broke out in my electorate in Peregian Springs back in 2019. They kissed their families goodbye and went to work, voluntarily, busily saving lives and saving property. They never ask for much afterwards, and despair at what they could have done better. They are essential threads in our fire blankets. On behalf of our community, I want to thank them and all of our volunteers.