




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR OODGEROO

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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)

 **Dr ROBINSON** (Oodgeroo—LNP) (10.47 am): I start by thanking all of those who work in the Redlands Coast area as police and in the various emergency services, either as frontline professionals or in support roles as employees or volunteers. Our SES, VMR, other rescue elements, our fires and our police serve in difficult circumstances at times and at risk to themselves. When an emergency occurs, you want to know that police and emergency services will be there to respond.

When you have a fire break out in the proximity of your household, for example—as occurred in our family home—you want to know that the QFES and Rural Fire Services are there and available. When you have a cyclone bearing down on you in Central Queensland or North Queensland, as we have had happen, you want to know that you will be safe. When you are in a boat at sea and it breaks down, as I have had happen, you want to know that you have the VMR and Water Police there.

I want to thank all of those who participated in the process of this bill: the committee members of parliament, the staff, all of the submitters, the witnesses and the stakeholders. I thank the Water Police and the other police who are doing it tough in a youth crime crisis and during the freak weather events that we have been through in recent times. I want to thank the local VMR rescue that keeps us safe on the water at their own risk. They respond to boats that are overturned and they have wonderfully rescued so many people.

Sadly, however, some have lost their lives in our local area, in the southern part of Moreton Bay and in Moreton Bay more widely. I want to thank the Raby Bay VMR and the Dunwich VMR for the work they do. I think of the many times on the south bar, the southern passage between North Stradbroke Island and Moreton Island, when, sadly, boats have experienced difficulty and come to grief. The VMR respond quickly as do our Water Police. They have done so at their own risk at times. During my time here I have known of the case of one VMR boat that came into trouble when rescuing someone off that bar. The VMR boat flipped over and our VMR volunteers were thrown into the ocean. I am very grateful that they came to no great harm. Those who were rescuing needed also to be rescued. It is very risky work; we note that and we are very grateful for that.

I want to thank the Redland SES that is always winning all kinds of prizes for outstanding work across the state at the annual awards. They are an exemplary group.

Ms Richards: Best in the state.

Dr ROBINSON: I take that interjection. They continue to be at the top in terms of their performance.

I want to thank the QFES and RFS for keeping the fire risk down. There is much I could say if we had more time to speak on the bill. However, we have the truncated situation of dealing with all of these bills in cognate. I would have liked to have spoken separately about the great work of our fireies in the Redland area, including the volunteers who work there, and some of the incidents they have responded to. However, there is not really scope in this debate to take a lot of time to do that.

I want to particularly put on the record my thanks for the Capalaba fire station and the Rural Fire Services that had to respond from the Gold Coast and saved many homes in Sheldon during a fire outbreak several years ago. They were wonderful. In fact, they saved our family home and so we are incredibly grateful. When that has happened to you personally, when you have a fire coming down on your family home, it is not a great feeling. You do the right thing: you respond, you get out and you do what you can to help if you can. I want to thank those who, at risk to their own lives, work to keep us all safe.

I want to spend my remaining time talking about Marine Rescue Queensland and again thank the Water Police for their work in the waters of Moreton Bay around North Stradbroke Island and the Southern Moreton Bay Islands. I also thank them for their work in coordinating with VMRs in the area when incidents occur at sea. This cooperative relationship is really important. The general thrust of the Marine Rescue Queensland Bill is to better coordinate the emergency response at sea and that is universally supported. Having said that, the process of merging VMR and the coastguard has been a drawn-out one and has failed to produce agreement across the board with all of the bases, and that is a sad fact. Further, many VMRs have expressed privately that they have felt really mucked around throughout this process. Some feel they were not listened to, some feel they have not had their concerns addressed and some have not agreed to the changes. The Blue Water Review, which aimed to merge VMR and coastguard entities, was a drawn-out, frustrating and costly process that failed to convince all chapters to come on board.

The committee heard that not all VMR groups will move across and migrate in July. The process whereby the volunteer organisations will be brought on board will be a staged process, so come 1 July not everyone will be on board. Some VMRs have accepted the changes and some have rejected the government's new structure. How this will work in practice is not super clear and I do not believe the minister has satisfactorily addressed that problem. We certainly do not want to see different systems cause risk at a time of emergency response. I flag that there is more work that needs to be done there.

Some of the reasons for rejecting the government's direction include the assets, bank accounts, local ownership and sense of organisational culture going forward. In her submission, one particular senior volunteer expressed concerns about the Blue Water Review and the transition of MRQ to the QPS. She said—

In terms of communication with the state government, it has been extremely difficult to achieve transparent, accountable communication with the state government and QFES. We have dealt with a frequently changing cohort of public servants who appear to have been inadequately briefed on the process and who appear to be withholding information from us. The state government refers to this process as a transition. It is not a transition; it is a takeover. To be honest, we have been patronised and kept in the dark. We ask questions and receive no answers. We get very little communication, and the verbal communication we do get is scant and peremptory.

This is disappointing. This does not build confidence and I would call on the government to be more careful in how they handle the remainder of the VMRs that have not yet agreed to come on board. The submitter went on to address other issues like the assets and the savings. She said—

We have been told by the state government that all of our assets will be compulsorily transferred to the state government as part of the transition. We are told that our cash reserves will be held by the state government in a fenced account. Should we wish to spend money on, for example, our community education program, we can apply to the state government for those funds, and if the public servant who decides such matters agrees with our process, then we will be given some of our own money to spend. We do not understand how this process is going to work. We currently have some \$740,000 in the bank. We have worked very hard for that money. Of that money, \$120,000 has been raised through sausage sizzles and donations. ... We have been told by the state government that we will be required to continue to fundraise and those funds will be transferred to them to manage. We really do not understand how this is going to work. We are on the cusp of a piece of legislation being passed that we do not think is fit for purpose.

There may be some misunderstandings or miscommunications, but that is how some of our senior VMR volunteers, who have faithfully served the state and their local area, feel about this process. I would call on the government, the minister and others involved to be clear and to answer the questions that have been raised. They are very real concerns raised by a number of VMR bases. It is absolutely critical that they all be on board and are using the same emergency response process so there is no confusion out at sea and no additional risk created by having a two-tiered system. The government has had a lot of time to get this right and they obviously have more work to do.