




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR MAIWAR

Record of Proceedings, 30 April 2024

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

 **Mr BERKMAN** (Maiwar—Grn) (6.45 pm): I rise to make my contribution to this cognate debate on four bills—yep, four. I think that must be some kind of record. At least this time, I suppose, they are four bills that are somewhat related to each other. It makes it a little bit easier to swallow than it was last week when we had two separate cognate debates which included two bills each that were some of the most significant legislation that we have seen in this place but were squeezed through in record time, and two bills were completely unrelated. I will put my procedural concerns aside for the time being, though.

It is worth noting at the outset that there are some quite legitimate concerns about the operational structures that are proposed in the rearrangement under these bills, not least of all the kind of top-down, almost quasi-militaristic structures that are proposed. I note specifically the RFS concerns about bringing volunteer-based organisations—these really grassroots, bottom-up organisations—under this kind of new proposed scheme and under the control of a bureaucracy that has little or no experience or understanding of the volunteer experience and the volunteer management in the fashion that it occurs in the RFS.

Other members have already mentioned some of the concerns around uncertainty around the reallocation of funds, which I think are entirely fair. I hope that they are addressed by the minister. Additionally, we should always approach the expansion of police powers and functions very carefully. It is obviously quite a substantial shift to have these new functions sit under the Queensland Police Service, but in this instance it seems like a sensible enough suggestion. I am very eager to see how it plays out in the long run.

To start with, I did want to turn to some submissions from organisations including QCOSS, Neighbourhood Centres Queensland and Community Legal Centres Queensland that raised the huge contribution of neighbourhood and community centres and other similar community-based organisations in disaster response and recovery. That is not to detract in any way from the extraordinary work that is done by the rest of our emergency service workers and their respective organisations, but this was a theme that they raised in hearings that also emerged in the Community Support and Services Committee's inquiry into social isolation and loneliness.

We heard in both that inquiry and the inquiry that covered three out of four of these bills—at least in the previous inquiry—that neighbourhood and community centres were essentially operating with funding only for a single full-time-equivalent staff member in a lot of cases, which means they are obviously playing an incredibly oversized role in disaster response. The government response to that inquiry was to quite significantly increase funding for neighbourhood and community centres across the board. It is obviously a welcome additional funding source, but I still would suggest that it is not enough

when we consider the myriad various roles that neighbourhood and community centres play. It is not just about creating community hubs that support disaster recovery efforts, although this is clearly a pivotally important role, particularly in those disaster-prone areas across the state.

I think it is important for us to recognise just how important it is for governments to foster connected communities because connected communities are resilient communities. We have seen that time and again. It was certainly my experience during the 2022 floods—seeing the existing connections in our communities really bringing everyone together. It is like the social glue that everyone needed at that point to suck it up, put on the gumboots and get into the mud. I was really proud and impressed to see the small army of volunteers that the Greens had put together in the federal election campaign at that point going out in droves to get in amongst the muck. It is those pre-existing coordinated groups that are ready at the drop of a hat to get in amongst it.

All of this is to highlight the importance and value of adequately resourcing the non-government and community sector for both their bread-and-butter community support work and the valuable disaster recovery work they do. If the underpaid, underappreciated staff in neighbourhood and community centres are spending all their time meeting the daily needs of the community they serve—be they social needs or material needs—we cannot expect that they will have any capacity for other important community work. As QCOSS put it, substantial additional investment is necessary—

... to engage with the strategic meetings of relevant bodies; sufficient and ongoing funding for specialised staff such as disaster resilience workers to undertake disaster response and resilience activities; and increased funding to support emergency response infrastructure, and equipment such as generators.

Community Legal Centres Queensland put it this way—

We would like to see more investment in particular for community and social service organisations that really do that long work of holding communities together long after the fire front has passed and long after the floodwaters have receded.

I could not agree more with that sentiment. We see the ADF come into town in that immediate emergency response, but it is ultimately the people on the ground who are left in the wake of these disasters and who really struggle to put it back together, and neighbourhood and community centres are so integral to that. In response to this issue, the Queensland Police Service predictably noted that the allocation of funding for such organisations is a matter of policy. All we can do is encourage the government to continue to increase funding to all of these non-government and neighbourhood and community sector organisations.

Another issue that was raised specifically in the hearings by Monica Taylor, the disaster and climate resilience project coordinator at Community Legal Centres Queensland, was the fact that this is actually a golden opportunity, as she put it, for a minor additional reform to insert good Samaritan protections into our civil liability legislation. The civil liability regime is already being reformed through this package, which is why it is such a good opportunity. There are necessary and simple reforms to that civil liability framework that address the risk that is posed to those everyday heroes who jump in their tinny or their kayak or whatever it might be in response to a disaster and get out there and help. They just get in amongst it and help those who need help.

The situation is different for volunteers in the SES, for example. They have an explicit exemption from liability under the Civil Liability Act, whereas if something goes wrong or someone gets hurt while Joe Blow in his tinnie is trying to help, they are potentially exposed to civil liability despite their best efforts. To avoid this kind of disincentive for the community to engage and offer help in the midst of natural disasters and the recovery and clean up, we need some reform. It should be a simple reform. I encourage the government to take some steps in that direction, as suggested by CLCQ.

It is obviously our hope that this swag of reform will leave our emergency services respondents in better shape to be able to continue to offer the absolutely invaluable work they do for Queensland and in support of Queenslanders—because, let us face it, we would be lost without them. It has been mentioned already—and I am sure it will be mentioned again in this debate—that we know Queensland is the most disaster prone state in the country. We see year after year, especially in La Nina years, those staggering clean-up bills coming through time and time again. They are not getting any smaller and it is not getting any easier for Queenslanders to insure their homes, properties and possessions, and all of this will only worsen as the impacts of climate change take hold.

We can make these kinds of administrative rearrangements and restructure the organisations that we rely on to come and mop up the mess after the fact, but we need to take urgent steps to address climate change. Again, I will accept that the government has done some great work domestically on our domestic renewable targets and emissions reductions targets, but as long as we continue to dig up and export coal and gas, as long as we actively advocate for a longer life for the fossil fuel sector, we have blood on our hands. We are directly contributing to those harms that are experienced by not just Queenslanders, as the most disaster prone state in the country, but people all over the world.

It is a sobering thought for me, if I am really honest, that my nearly five-year-old daughter has in her lifetime lived through one notionally one-in-100-year flood and the burning of 37-odd per cent of the Gondwana World Heritage area. These rainforests have never burned and are not adapted to deal with fire, and we are at risk of losing them. My 14-year-old has lived through two one-in-100-year flood events in his short life. We need to do more to address climate change or no tinkering with emergency services is going to help us.