




Speech By
Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

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 BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (6.30 pm): We must support any improvements to the response of agencies to disasters and disaster management. I note both ministers' contributions and I welcome those clarifications, but there are still some questions to be asked on behalf of the people we have been talking to. There are recurring themes in these bills. Given the government's failure to deliver the promised additional police officers around this state, members would be right to question how these positions will be filled without an impact on frontline policing. Queenslanders rely heavily on brave volunteers in their time of need and the government must get this implementation right.

The lack of consultation and mixed messaging has been referred to by volunteers in many of the affected groups. We should be encouraging volunteers by being open and transparent with them. The association president I spoke to in the Wide Bay was given seven working days over Christmas from receipt of the draft legislation to consult with association members. Given that the Blue Water Review was completed in 2018, the government has had more than enough time to consult in a meaningful and respectful manner with VMR and coastguard members.

A large proportion of the real effects on volunteers will come through regulation rather than legislation. The government has not made the regulations public, which means that even as the legislation comes before the House volunteers still do not know all of the details. The transfer of volunteer agencies to the Queensland Police Service will bring with it a significant change in how these groups operate. The government must ensure that volunteers are respected and that the transition is implemented in a way that respects their service to the community.

In addition to staff members, these reforms will bring about 8,000 VMR and SES volunteers under the control of the Queensland Police Service. There are concerns regarding the ability of the QPS to manage so many additional staff and volunteers. The time taken by the government, including the cost to undertake lengthy reviews, has resulted in angst amongst those volunteer organisations subject to the reviews.

Estimated costs, which have been talked about in some of the committee's reporting, include allocating up to \$10 million over two years and providing 30 temporary full-time equivalent positions to the Reform Implementation Taskforce; and allocating approximately \$142 million per annum ongoing from 2023-24 through the following distributions, and I talk about this in a positive light: \$60 million per annum for the SES, \$27 million per annum for the establishment of MRQ, \$20 million per annum for disaster management functions in the QPS and \$11 million per annum to contribute to the cost of 143 additional firefighters. I have long advocated in this place for a fairer distribution of the Emergency Management Levy, and it is great to see that finally real funding will make a real change to these wonderful organisations, volunteers and paid staff.

Estimated costs also include allocating up to 550 full-time equivalent positions to support implementation of the independent review report recommendations, which includes the provision of an additional 60 FTE equivalents for the SES—hoping there are positive outcomes for all—and the additional 30 FTE positions that have been allocated to the Reconstruction Authority are also welcome.

The bill's stated purpose is to establish a new Marine Rescue Queensland Act, the main purpose of which is to establish MRQ. The bill also proposes to establish the functions, powers and membership of MRQ, the role and functions of the Queensland Police Service Commissioner in relation to MRQ, and the appointment and administrative arrangements of authorised marine rescue officers. The bill will combine the Australian Volunteer Coastguard Association and Volunteer Marine Rescue Association Queensland into Marine Rescue Queensland as a single entity. We know that is not all rosy and we know there are concerns going forward, particularly with the rollout as proposed. Some brigades and some flotillas in my electorate will be included and some will be pushed past 1 July.

Public education was talked about. I welcome the member for Morayfield and Minister for Police talking about communication, because it was a huge issue. It continues to be a huge issue, with information not being disseminated. Volunteers said they did not feel valued. They did not feel that communication was fair and reasonable. Recommendation 2 is critical to bring people along with the process, and that is why we welcomed those representations from the committee to talk about a better communication strategy. Dr Kingston, who is from up my way, said they did not have real issues with the bill but he also said—

We do, however, have significant concerns with the largely yet to be developed doctrine and regulations to underpin the legislation.

We pass on Dr Graham Kingston's concerns.

The culture of volunteerism must be allowed to continue and flourish. Volunteer marine rescues or coastguards may choose not to be part of MRQ. I guess we will see what chaos and crisis that may bring. This has been a long time in the making, and the fact that we have not been able to get this right has been disturbing for a lot of flotillas and the communities they represent.

The *Review into volunteer marine rescue organisations in Queensland*, the Blue Water Review, was conducted from 2018 to 2020 and so far has cost \$27 million. I believe there is more to come. The estimated annual operating costs of marine rescue in Queensland, according to the QPS, is only \$8 million. We put a lot of money into reviews. We would argue that this new entity should be cohesive and effective. It should be doing the work they want to do, which is to get on the water and provide a safe environment for the people who need their services.

I share concerns regarding the lack of information provided to volunteers as to how the new arrangements will operate. I know the minister tried to answer the question about the compulsory acquisition of equipment, but the issue still remains about how we access money. I really hope there is clear communication from the government, particularly in relation to how MRQ and others will operate. Volunteers are the backbone. During the committee process we heard of real concerns that people had as a result of conversations with public servants who had come out to talk to the flotillas. One particular brigade that will be spoken about later in the debate has over \$740,000 in the bank. Of that, \$120,000 has been raised through sausage sizzles and donations. If they still feel uncomfortable with the process then we have a problem with communication. I urge both sides of the House to make sure we respect these processes and ensure going forward the process will allow fundraising funds to not be transferred away from flotillas and organisations. We do not want to see that angst. The people who gave evidence to the committee I am proud to be deputy chair of were really quite angry about the process.

Of utmost importance to the Queensland Police Service is supporting emergency service members so they can help Queenslanders when they need it most. My meetings with rural fire brigade representatives has exposed that volunteers are angry and they do feel undervalued. Those experienced members who turn up to protect us every time—covering 93 per cent of the state—know there is a push for union control. Those are their words; not mine. They have heard of stacked statistics being rolled out over the last 12 months, and that is something that we all should be taking time to have a look at.

I had hoped that these bills would have dealt with the botched blue card system that continues to plague rural fire services across the great state of Queensland. Before someone pulls me up I will take this opportunity to talk about the issue of dress uniforms. They have still not been provided to volunteers and rural fire services. Locally, it has been highlighted that the Bundaberg Rural Fire Brigade area may pick up an additional 45 rural fire brigades from the North Burnett under the area office responsibilities, and many of the local first officers are asking questions about those issues going forward. We must support the many submitters who want what was promised: a different structure; a completely independent rural fire department. That is what they were promised many times by the government. Now that appears to have been taken off the table.

I would also like to put on the record that the committee process was really valuable in terms of the three bills we had carriage of at the time. There were wonderful men and women who appeared before us in the committee process to tell their stories. While we are being somewhat critical of the process, I will take this opportunity to give a shout-out to the men and women who provide these amazing services, particularly the unpaid volunteers who continue to turn up when we ask them to. I do acknowledge that this legislation supports that. All in this House should be happy that we are working positively towards outcomes that will give protection to our volunteers. Without repeating myself, I do particularly want to acknowledge the distribution of extra funding. There has been a 'chook raffle' mentality for way too long, and the fact that we can resource and provide opportunities for the men and women of our volunteer services is something that we should applaud.

I do encourage, as I said before, the police minister in particular to continue his conversations about communication and transparency. Equally, the minister for emergency services, in relation to the carriage of the disaster management component, should acknowledge the comments that were made earlier about making sure assets and other contentious issues are explained. That is all we could ever ask—that is, that we continue to engage with these organisations to make sure they remain and we do not see a mass exodus of volunteers, as is being threatened. That would be a sad day if it is only based on communication.