



Speech by

Andrew Cripps

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

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COMMUNITY AMBULANCE COVER AND OTHER ACTS AMENDMENT BILL

Mr CRIPPS (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (3.17 pm): I rise to make a contribution to the debate on the Community Ambulance Cover and Other Acts Amendment Bill 2007. The explanatory notes accompanying the bill advise members that a number of acts will be amended as a result of this bill passing through this place. I intend to speak about the parts of the bill concerning the changes to the Community Ambulance Cover Act 2003.

The community ambulance cover saga has been an ongoing matter of contention across Queensland since the state government introduced the community ambulance levy in 2003. Since 1 July 2003 all Queensland residents have been covered for the cost of emergency ambulance services. There is no doubt that it is a positive thing to have such widespread ambulance cover for the people of Queensland.

Electricity retailers and suppliers collect the levy on behalf of the Queensland government through their existing billing arrangements. There are a range of levy exemptions available to eligible Queenslanders, although there has been a real fight to get the Beattie government to recognise the need in some cases. I will speak about those matters more in a few moments.

From 1 July 2006 the levy has been charged at the rate of about 26c a day or approximately \$95 for the full financial year. The rate is adjusted annually in line with the movements in the CPI for Brisbane. Community ambulance cover is not a user pays system. Regardless of who pays for the electricity supply to the business or the household where the account is read, all Queenslanders are automatically covered for the cost of emergency ambulance services.

The Queensland government contends that all funds raised through the community ambulance cover levy go towards funding the Queensland Ambulance Service, less administration fees paid to electricity retailers. The Beattie government has never been very forthcoming with the figures to show clearly how the community ambulance cover levy makes its way through the electricity retailers to the Treasury and then to the QAS. I would welcome the Treasurer providing to the House a detailed and transparent report showing how the monies collected via the levy are allocated in their entirety to the QAS. The people of Queensland deserve to know how effective the ambulance levy is in providing a stable funding source for the QAS. Given that the QAS still experiences significant staff and resource issues, it is reasonable to ask the state government to justify why it believes the ambulance levy is an effective tool if the QAS continues to experience difficulties.

The Community Ambulance Cover Act 2003 provides for a range of exemptions from paying the levy. This includes premises where there are multiple accounts for non-domestic use, pensioners, farm sheds, farm pumps, religious institutions and a number of government agencies. However, there has been an unfortunate delay by the Beattie government in recognising the case for exemption for a number of Queenslanders. Initially in 2003, the Queensland government extended exemptions for the community ambulance cover levy to commercial and residential building common accounts, residential building multiple accounts, security lighting accounts, public park facility accounts, hot water system accounts and accounts related to medical conditions. The Queensland coalition questioned the fairness of

the levy scheme insofar as collecting the levy on electricity accounts is concerned and particularly where individuals were and continue to be required to pay the levy several times. That situation is still occurring and the inequity faced by many people who are paying the levy twice, three times or more remains a matter that is raised with me regularly.

It took a further three years until May 2006 for the Beattie government to extend ambulance levy exemptions to primary producers with farm sheds involved in the commercial production of horticultural products, and the case of the rural sector to receive an appropriate exemption was put strongly by the Queensland coalition. To be eligible under the expanded exemption criteria, the shed had to be on a separate electricity account and on land primarily used for primary production. Also from May 2006 the levy exemption for water pumps was expanded to include primary producers involved in the commercial production of horticultural products. Again, to be eligible for the expanded water pump levy exemption, a water pump must be on a separate electricity account and used for irrigation or primary production purposes.

It is not in any way an exaggeration to say that there are some very serious difficulties being faced by the QAS at this point. These difficulties relate to both staffing and resources. I wrote to the Minister for Emergency Services in January this year, drawing his attention to an unsatisfactory situation that was prevailing.

Ms BLIGH: I rise to a point of order. The previous Deputy Speaker made an earlier ruling on this issue. This bill is not a bill that allows members to have a wide-ranging debate about the Queensland Ambulance Service or, indeed, about the policy issues surrounding the community ambulance cover. It is a bill which simply transfers the existing requirements to a new owner. I ask you to call for relevance in the speeches.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr O'Brien): Order! I was giving the member some leeway. The previous Deputy Speaker did make some announcements about this during the previous speech. I do not know if the member for Hinchinbrook was in the House at the time, but I would ask you to return to the specific provisions of the bill, please.

Mr CRIPPS: I am speaking about how the bill applies to the ambulance levy and how the effectiveness of the funding regime allows for appropriate resourcing and staffing of ambulance stations.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! Yes, and the ruling is that that is not directly related to the provisions of the bill.

Mr CRIPPS: Very well. In any event, I will move on with my contribution by saying that the work of local ambulance committees is pretty crucial for the ongoing delivery of ambulance services to Queensland communities. This is a fact that reflects very well on the commitment and generosity of local ambulance committee members and the communities that support those committees. However, it reflects badly on the government that increasingly the local ambulance services are relying more and more on LACs to obtain equipment for their local ambulances. This situation is spelt out quite clearly in the 2005-06 annual report of the Department of Emergency Services where contributions from local ambulance committees to the operating revenue of the QAS rose from \$511,000 in 2005 to \$1,267,000 in 2006. To their great credit, local ambulance committees have responded to the increasing requirement for them to provide more and more funds to their local ambulance service by more than doubling their contributions in one year. Local committees are determined not to see their ambulance officers go without the equipment and the resources they need to deliver high-quality ambulatory services to the community.

I am lucky to have several very active and very dedicated LACs in my electorate of Hinchinbrook including those in Innisfail, South Johnstone, Silkwood, Tully, Cardwell, Ingham, Halifax and the northern beaches area of Thuringowa city, which has an ambulance station at Black River. I know that the ambulance officers at those stations also appreciate the material support and friendship they get from the LAC. While I appreciate that this bill makes changes to accommodate the introduction of full retail competition into the electricity market and thus affects the collection of the ambulance levy through electricity accounts, the problems associated with the implementation of the levy and the difficulties currently being experienced in the QAS as far as staff and resources are concerned continue to be important and salient issues affecting my electorate and no doubt many communities across the state of Queensland. Evidently, the expression of those difficulties will have to wait for a debate on another day.