



MATTERS OF PUBLIC INTEREST

Speech by
GLEN ELMES
Member for Noosa

Hansard, 11 November 2008

Queensland Ambulance Service

Mr ELMES (Noosa--LNP) (12.14 pm): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker Kiernan, and it is nice to see you in the chair. I rise this afternoon to speak on the crisis which is the Queensland Ambulance Service.

The men and women of our Ambulance Service--our paramedics--have the highest skill levels in Australia, yet the Bligh Labor government seems intent on short-changing our paramedics and taking advantage of their goodwill and determination to do the job they love. Early last week Queensland ambulance personnel held a day of action across this state. In my travels around my electorate that day I firstly drove by the Tewantin Ambulance Station and noticed signage highlighting the plight of our ambos. During the course of the next couple of hours I spoke with some fantastic members of the QAS both at the Tewantin station and later as a follow-up at the Noosa Heads Ambulance Station. When you look at the circumstances under which these highly trained professionals work, you have to feel the utmost sympathy for them.

I was shocked to find that as a result of my brief visit to two of the ambulance stations in my electorate the officers concerned received a 'please explain' from higher authorities as to why they allowed a member of the opposition on to Queensland ambulance property. It is precisely these ongoing actions by a government that has everything to hide and nothing of substance to show that increasingly have Queenslanders ready to assign the Bligh Labor government to the rubbish bin of history.

How can it be that an ordinary Queensland citizen can walk into an ambulance station but an ordinary Queensland citizen who just happens to be an opposition member of parliament cannot?

I have asked two questions on notice about the age and state of repair of the Queensland ambulance fleet--one to this minister and one to the previous minister. Queenslanders I am sure would be shocked to learn that we have ambulances in the north coast region--and I am sure throughout the rest of the state--with in excess of 400,000 kilometres on the clock.

I do not doubt for one moment that they are maintained correctly, but why is it that this Queensland government allows our ambulance fleet to degrade to this extent? There should not be an ambulance on the road in Queensland that has done more than 350,000 kilometres or is of an age greater than nine years. As an example, police vehicles in Queensland are turned over at around 40,000 kilometres. Our ambulance fleet is worn out.

The same can be said of our paramedics--men and women who in many cases complete 12-hour shifts without rest pauses or meal breaks, who find that if they are sick, injured or under WorkCover they are paid only the flat award rate, who are increasingly seeing an expectation of skill levels going up and pay points being removed if they have difficulty in complying. In this state we have two great universities--one is the University of Queensland and the other is the University of the Sunshine Coast--that specialise in providing degrees in paramedic studies that should see at least an adequate number of trained paramedics becoming available for service to the Queensland community.

In many cases, though, we train them in Queensland and the ambulance services in Victoria and New South Wales get the benefit because conditions in those states are far superior to those in Queensland. A further drain on trained professionals is currently underway with the recruitment by a private company of up to 80 paramedics for service on Queensland industrial sites, primarily coalmines. These are paramedics the Queensland Ambulance Service cannot afford to lose. Decent men and women become paramedics because they want to save lives and help people, but working ridiculous hours and plugging the gaps left as other paramedics either move interstate or switch jobs is making it increasingly difficult. Queensland paramedics should not finish work so exhausted that they worry about their safety and the safety of others as they drive home after long shifts and when they get home are far too tired to spend time with their families.

Add to that increased stress levels that come about because of the aggressiveness and antisocial behaviour of some individuals in our society and the pressure brought about by the almost daily ramping outside Queensland hospitals and it is no wonder the job of a Queensland ambo has become a pretty thankless task. Like the ambulance fleet, our paramedics are worn out and it is about time the Minister for Emergency Services started to treat these professionals with the respect they deserve.
