



**EYRE PENINSULA SCHOOL BUSES
3 March 2009**

Mrs PENFOLD (Flinders) (15:38): Last Thursday all schools on Eyre Peninsula were closed because of a possible threat from fire—a decision made instantaneously, supposedly for the safety and wellbeing of students, yet a promise that really would look after the safety and wellbeing of students made in 2004 by the then minister for education to put air-conditioning and seatbelts in school buses in the region as a matter of priority has been ignored. Even worse, I understand that the budget for replacement school buses since then has not been fully expended.

Rural students and families are fed up with the government's grand gestures and media grabs. It must immediately do what it promised years ago and provide regional children with safe buses. I have been advised that the few buses that have been replaced could not take the rough conditions, with air-conditioning breaking down and doors jamming, leaking dust into interiors. People have told me that they have been told to 'shut up' when questioning bus maintenance. When visiting Miltaburra school last year I photographed two buses—one a 1989 model and a 1990 model. Neither bus was air-conditioned, neither had seatbelts, neither was dust proof and both were rusty. On one bus the step was so rusty that it had been fixed with rivets. These are indicative of departmental buses.

Recently, I compared putting our children into hot buses being tantamount to child abuse. In response, the minister's spokesperson on the ABC tried to suggest that the buses referred to without air conditioning and seatbelts were privately contracted buses. I can assure the house that the buses to which I referred are not contract buses, they are education department buses. An article in *The Advertiser* on 7 February 2009 stated:

Medical experts have warned that prolonged exposure to temperatures above 40C can be fatal to children in cars.

Dale Howell, Chairperson of the Cummins Area School Governing Council, in an article in the *Port Lincoln Times* on 17 February 2009 said, 'It could be anywhere up to 60 degrees in those buses.' In the same article, parent Davina Nettle stated:

The heat had taken its toll of the children's health, with one of her daughter's friends suffering a blood nose possibly due to the heat inside the bus.

Over the years, I have lobbied time and again on behalf of families for air conditioning and seatbelts to be fitted as standard in school buses as safety and health measures.

The major complaints are the absence of air conditioning, the large amounts of dust sucked into the bus, the absence of seatbelts and the unsuitability of buses chosen for travel on country roads. It is not too dramatic to ask: will there have to be a death before action is taken? I quote from letters:

The children are exposed to extreme heat. We regularly experience days in the high thirties and beyond and by the time the children get to the bus the temperature is exacerbated by having to sit in an already very hot bus.

The children and driver try to get some relief by opening the windows but because of the dirt roads the dust that is sucked into the bus becomes a health issue particularly to our children with asthma.

One twelve-year-old girl is on daily medication and according to her GP dust is the main cause.

Even with the windows closed the bus still seems to leak a large amount of dust and the road noise is quite unacceptable.

It continues to worry us that our children are still vulnerable riding on rough roads where kangaroos are common and they are still not in seatbelts.

We are concerned about the suitability of the buses to travel on gravel roads as there are safety issues on windy days when the door is blown open and the bus automatically decelerates. In which case, someone has to hold the door shut so that the bus can continue on its journey.

Local bus drivers have recorded temperatures in the low 50sC on buses in Cleve, where just one of the school's five government buses is air-conditioned.

Mangalo parents Andrew and Rebecca Story believe their children's health is being seriously affected by high bus temperatures. Mrs Story said, 'We've got one little boy with serious allergies and the heat affects him on the way home, his face gets puffy and they're all just tired out.'

We are constantly being bombarded with messages and information about global warming or climate change, and greenhouse gases creating a rise in temperature. We are told to expect a higher number of days of above 40° Celsius temperatures.

Added to the health issues is an equal if not greater risk in a heatwave with buses which are not air-conditioned is the lack of communication. Mobile phones, even satellite phones, do not work reliably in many of these areas, so drivers and children are potentially without contact with emergency support in the event of a crisis. I am told that it took more than 1½ hours for a volunteer ambulance to reach a school it was called to. What would it be like if this had been a bus on a road somewhere without proper communication—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order!

Mrs PENFOLD: —in a heatwave.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! The member was going beyond the privileges. Time has expired.

Remainder of speech.....

It is not too dramatic to ask Does there have to be a death before action is taken. I conclude with one constituent's colourful comment; "Once again us remote tax paying country citizens feel as though we have been overlooked and treated like mushrooms, (kept in the dark and fed bull manure).

ROAD TRAFFIC (SCHOOL BUS SEAT BELTS) AMENDMENT BILL 14 November 2006

Adjourned debate on second reading.

(Continued from 20 September. Page 883.)

Mrs PENFOLD (Flinders): I rise to enthusiastically support this bill on behalf of all our regional students, their parents, grandparents, friends and families who recognise that their loved ones are often on substandard roads for long periods in buses that are far from new. Along with the member for Waite, I also have concerns that this government is reluctant to support the provision of seatbelts in our school buses, despite providing millions of dollars for trams to replace free, almost-new buses in the city. Concern is so great that a fund has been established by the Masonic Foundation to help the government more quickly to install these seatbelts in buses, and I commend the Masonic Foundation for that. I urge all those city people who use the free city buses to give a thought to our young country people and donate a few dollars towards this very worthy cause.

While the risk to our regional students is considered low—as has just been stated by the member for the city seat of Enfield—if we have a serious accident, as occurred recently in my electorate of Flinders on Eyre Peninsula, it could cost dozens of young lives. Fortunately no lives were lost on that occasion, but, with 12 000 kilometres of unsealed road on Eyre Peninsula alone, it could happen at any time. Why do we have to wait until it is too late and then take action? How much better to do it now. Hold off the extension of the tramline and buy new buses for our country students, not just with seatbelts but also with padded seats and with air-conditioning, not buses like those which were delivered under this Labor government to some country schools and which had to be withdrawn when it was found that they were built for sealed roads and air conditioners became clogged with dust and stopped working. In addition, the doors sprang open while the bus was moving, which automatically switched off the ignition, so I am told; again caused by the dust and rough roads encountered by these buses. I support the bill.

The Hon. R.G. KERIN secured the adjournment of the debate.

School buses / seat belts 21 September 2006

Mrs PENFOLD (Flinders): I move: That this house commends the Masonic Foundation for being proactive in fundraising for the provision of seatbelts in South Australian school buses.

For many years very little was publicly known about the Freemasons. It was seen as a secret society for men that had rituals and symbols based in a past age which appeared to have very little relevance to the lives of ordinary people. Over the years I became aware that there was a lot more to this society, and that it was well known for its good works. However, it was not until the Masonic Foundation was established in 1989, in order to create a more formal structure for the benevolent activities of freemasonry in South Australia and the Northern Territory, that I, and the ordinary public, really began to appreciate its work. The Masonic Foundation has been clearly established as the charitable arm of freemasonry and, likewise, the major fundraising arm of freemasonry.

Mr Koutsantonis interjecting:

Mrs PENFOLD: I certainly do support freemasonry.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! The member for West Torrens will desist.

Mrs PENFOLD: The success story of the foundation is the impact it has had in caring in so many areas of need and in providing assistance, in conjunction with the Freemason lodges, to local communities, clearly putting into practice one of the principal purposes of freemasonry's existence—that being charity.

A registered charitable organisation, the foundation administers two major funds: the general fund and the special projects fund. The foundation provides charitable grants to persons or organisations in need, on an annual basis. Applications for assistance can be directed through any Freemasons lodge, or direct to the Masonic Foundation Incorporated, which is located on Grange Road, Flinders Park.

The 2005 report of the board of management of the Masonic Foundation lists numerous donations, scholarships of many kinds, and a number of benevolent appeals. One of these is the Freemasons Eyre Peninsula Bushfire Relief Appeal. I take this opportunity to thank them in particular for this one, and to put on record the great appreciation of the people in my electorate of Flinders, covering southern Eyre Peninsula, who were the recipients of this appeal. This terrifying bushfire ravaged Eyre Peninsula on Black Tuesday, 11 January 2005, laying waste to all in its path and, tragically, taking a number of lives. Houses were destroyed, along with much loved personal and irreplaceable possessions, livestock and livelihoods. Many survivors were left with only the clothes they were wearing.

On 13 January, chairman Geoffrey Benny and executive director Robert Clyne drove to the area, where they met with Malcolm Schluter and many other local Freemasons. After talking to people on the ground and assessing the situation, they reported back to the Grand Master, and the Freemasons Eyre Peninsula Bushfire Relief Appeal was launched. Having only just launched its Tsunami Relief Appeal, it is a real credit to the public spirit of charity that the response was immediate and heartfelt. Upon learning about the tragedy through the media, interstate lodges also made generous donations to the appeal through the Masonic Foundation. By the

time the appeal closed, more than \$87 000 had been donated.

What makes the work of the Masonic Foundation particularly valuable is that donated funds are often accompanied with a vision for the best way to distribute them. Representatives of the two Eyre Peninsula lodges affected by the bushfire (Port Lincoln Lodge and Lodge Sirius) were consulted and asked to determine how they thought the money raised could be best used, with lasting benefits, for their communities.

A major problem in fighting the bushfire was the agonising delays experienced when fire appliances had to leave the scene of the fire to replenish their water supplies. To address this problem, they recommended that ten 20 000 gallon water tanks be purchased and erected in strategic locations in bushfire-prone areas determined in partnership with the Country Fire Service. The recommendation received enthusiastic endorsement by the foundation's board of management, and the program was commenced.

As the member for Flinders, I am very well aware of how the region's water shortage presents one of the largest obstacles to development, safety and lasting prosperity. This innovative project, accompanied by suitable signage and acknowledgment, will leave a lasting legacy of goodwill which will greatly benefit the community for years to come.

This month the Masonic Foundation has been specifically focusing on another issue that I believe has been inadequately addressed, that is, the provision of seatbelts on all school buses. In an ambitious move, the state Freemasons foundation has offered to raise the funds to ensure that every South Australian school bus is equipped with seatbelts for every child who travels on them. Foundation spokesman, Richard Flashman AM, said the following in a statement:

Freemasons are parents, grandparents and uncles and cousins of school-age children and we are simply not willing to sit on our hands, helplessly waiting for government to act to safeguard those children. We also believe that every parent views the safety of their children as being of paramount importance and not to be compromised by the need for what in reality is a small expenditure per child—especially given the length of service of the buses and the numbers of children to use them during the bus's lifetime. There can be nothing worse than to be told that your child has been injured, or worse, in a bus crash when a simple restraint installed in the vehicle could have prevented it, or at least reduced the level of injury. The Freemasons foundation has therefore committed to raise sufficient funds to ensure that every school bus is fitted with correctly engineered aircraft-style lap seatbelts.

I commend the Freemasons foundation for establishing the Belts on Buses foundation, donating seed funding of \$50 000 to launch this public appeal. The target is, of course, to see 100 per cent of school buses fitted with the basic safety requirement that is obligatory in a family car. However, the Freemasons undertake to ensure that every dollar raised is applied to the installation of seatbelts for as many buses as the money can cover.

The Freemasons are confident that every parent, as well as many other members of the public, will want to contribute towards this goal, and so has established a bank account with Bank SA to which contributions can be made directly. I am aware that the Port Lincoln Rotary Club, being so recently affected by the school bus crash on the Eyre Peninsula, will assist. In addition, it is hoped that many companies and commercial operations will wish to provide assistance in reaching the Belts on Buses target in the shortest possible time. Mr Flashman has also stated that if the state government finds that there are funds available to provide further assistance, those funds will be gratefully received and applied to the project.

I commend the Masonic Foundation for being proactive in fundraising for the provision of seatbelts in South Australian school buses, and I urge the state Labor government to support the Belts on Buses foundation to ensure the safety of all South Australian children, particularly those who spend many hours on buses, often on rough dirt roads in country areas.

School Buses 21 September 2006

Mrs PENFOLD (Flinders): I move: That this house condemns the Labor government for spending \$31 million of taxpayers' money on the 1.8 kilometre tram extension in Adelaide to replace modern free buses, while young people are travelling on dirt roads in 600 country buses, some of which are up to 25 years old, many without

seatbelts or airconditioning, sometimes three to a seat, and in 40 degree heat for over an hour.

Much has already been said about the issue of seatbelts in school buses. It is an issue that highlights the poor choices that the government makes in the spending of taxpayers' money. In fact, a large proportion of current spending is wasted on irrelevances and matters that do not have a lasting impact on improving the quality of life for South Australians and, more importantly, on matters that do not improve the infrastructure in the state that will provide ongoing jobs and prosperity.

Seatbelts in school buses has been a topic that has been extensively discussed and researched for some years now. It is an issue that needs to be addressed, but it cannot be addressed effectively unless the whole issue of school buses is looked at. The attitudes that existed more than 50 years ago, when school buses were first introduced extensively in the country with the amalgamation of small, one-teacher schools into area schools, are no longer acceptable today. Try to imagine communication without emails, mobile phones and the internet. Our attitudes and expectations of transport have advanced similarly.

An important corollary to the seatbelt saga is the age of school buses. The government needs a program of replacement. Payments to private contractors must be sufficient to allow the operator to replace the bus within a reasonable time frame. The replacement of departmental buses with modern vehicles that are fitted with seatbelts should also be accelerated. Probably all the buses could be replaced for the same amount as is being spent on the tramline extension.

Airconditioning should also be mandatory in new school buses. Children travel in the buses in the afternoon in the hottest part of the day in daylight saving. The west of the state has been written off in derogatory terms by people whose children and grandchildren do not have to put up with this health hazard. The tramline extension project should be considered in association with infrastructure needs across the state. It is quickly apparent that the tramline is a wasteful extravagance with plenty of negatives—\$31 million would seal a lot of roads.

It costs about \$110 000 per kilometre to seal one of our country roads, so we could look at—what is that, Martin? It would be about 310 kilometres of road. School buses travel over mainly unsealed roads, therefore children and drivers have to cope with dust, pot holes, water, corrugations and uneven surfaces. Drivers unused to corrugations can easily result in overturning a vehicle on road surfaces that become a safety issue. For example, the Executive Officer of the Eyre Peninsula Local Government Association, Vance Thomas, has calculated that the nine district councils in the region of Flinders maintain 12 918 kilometres of roads—17.5 per cent of the state's total, and 97 per cent of these are unsealed. This does not take into account the out of district regions that are not covered by councils.

The tramline extension will raise safety problems with respect to the flow of traffic and for patrons getting on and off the trams. Why make problems? Why not solve some, or is that too difficult a task? Taxpayer funds would be more productively spent in sealing rural and regional roads in South Australia. Metropolitan people do travel out into the regions, so it is a matter of safety for all South Australians. The Liberal program of sealing rural arterial roads, then sealing roads of economic significance, was dropped by this government. Safety appears not to be a concern for this government. I hope that the budget will make them reflect on that; and perhaps the government will put some funding into these regional roads, particularly the one from the main highway to the ferry that will travel to Lucky Bay.

A matter that must be addressed in association with seatbelts is liability. Who will be liable if the children do not wear the belts or if they take them off during travel? What will the liability of the driver (many of whom are teachers) or the owner be if these seatbelts are not worn? Issues are involved in ensuring not only that these seatbelts are put in but that they are installed in such a way as to ensure that liability issues are covered. The government has stated that it will legislate for seatbelts to be standard in all new buses. What is proposed by the government to replace existing arrangements for seating? For instance, some small children starting school are seated three to a seat, particularly in regional areas such as mine. This will be impossible with seatbelts, and it may mean that larger buses are required, which will be another issue and another expense, and I acknowledge that. It may be that there will have to be some charge for our children in country regions to travel on school buses as there is in the city.

I think that most families in country regions would feel that was an expense they would be happy to cover. Certainly, those who are not adequately covered by school bus services currently must take their children sometimes over 100 kilometres in a day to reach the local school and at very little compensation per kilometre. I commend the motion to the house, and I hope there will be support from both sides.

