



Speech by

Dr DAVID WATSON

MEMBER FOR MOGGILL

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WORKPLACE RELATIONS AMENDMENT BILL

Dr WATSON (Moggill—LP) (Leader of the Liberal Party) (9.30 p.m.): I rise briefly to support the shadow Minister and member for Clayfield in opposition to the Workplace Relations Amendment Bill 1998.

Mr Mackenroth interjected.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! The member will resume his speech.

Dr WATSON: When addressing this amendment Bill tonight, I believe it is important to refer back to when the Minister for Industrial Relations, the honourable member for Clayfield, introduced the original Workplace Relations Bill in 1996. I believe his comments in his second-reading speech are the most relevant aspect of tonight's debate. When introducing the Bill, he stated—

"... we must take the necessary steps to meet the economic and workplace challenges of the future. Queensland's coalition Government is committed to providing the State's businesses, particularly small businesses, with the best industrial relations system possible to meet the economic challenges of the future."

That was what the then Minister said he was trying to do. That is what he accomplished through the introduction of that Bill. That is important in today's age as technology and economic conditions throughout the world are changing very rapidly. If we are to continue to be productive in this country and in this State, if we are to compete against other countries in the export sector, we must be able to change our businesses to reflect the demands of any particular occasion. That is what the Bill that the former Minister introduced in 1996 was attempting to do.

The problem with this amendment Bill that we are debating tonight is that it is going backwards. It is starting to pull back the flexibility that was introduced in the Workplace Relations Bill 1996. This is a "back to the future" kind of amendment. It has no vision about the future of Australia and Queensland. It shows where we were in the past and desires to return to the past. That is one of the major problems with what we are doing tonight. This is a one-size-fits-all approach to industrial relations, a one-size-fits-all approach to running businesses and competing in an economy, rather than an approach that recognises that the economy changes, economic conditions change, technology changes and that we need a system that allows some adaptability and flexibility to meet those challenges.

The second problem with this Bill is that, in essence, it is anti-investment, anti-business, anti-jobs and anti-growth because it does not take into account the fact that we need to be flexible and adapt to economic changes.

Mrs Edmond interjected.

Dr WATSON: The Health Minister who interjects talks about a particular part of the tax package. If she wants to see a tax reform package that completely misses the idea of taxation reform, if she wants to see a tax reform package that is anti-jobs, anti-growth—

Mr SPEAKER: Order! This debate is about Queensland workplace agreements.

Dr WATSON: I am discussing those, Mr Speaker. I am discussing flexibility.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! The member will resume his speech.

Dr WATSON: If members want to see a tax reform package that is anti-jobs, anti-growth and anti the unemployed, they should study the package that Mr Beazley released today. Unfortunately,

the thinking demonstrated by the Federal Labor Party today is exactly the same kind of thinking that runs through this Bill. Forgetting about flexibility, forgetting about having to adapt to changes in economic circumstances, forgetting about changes in technology, forgetting about changes in the way our exporters have to compete, forgetting about the way domestic businesses have to compete against those importing into Australia—forgetting about all of those changes—this Bill reinforces the restrictions that are typical of the Labor Party's thinking.

When one remembers back to when we were considering the waterfront dispute and if one puts aside some of the extreme incidents that occurred during that dispute, one will realise that one aspect that came to the fore was the importance of the cost of doing business on the waterfront in Australia. Once upon a time, that aspect was not particularly important. When we were moving goods across the waterfront in Australia—even if we had "relatively inefficient practices"; even if we took longer than we should have taken—the costs of doing that were a rather small proportion of the total costs of transporting goods to Australia or exporting them from Australia.

However, over the past couple of decades, Australia has witnessed a substantial change in the cost structure in the transportation industry. In the exporting and importing fields we have seen larger and faster ships. We have seen containerisation for shipping and land transport. We have seen developments in bulk handling. Each and every one those developments—whether it be in relation to the speed of the ships, the technology of handling, the kind of turnarounds that can be achieved—has driven down the costs of transporting goods to and from Australia.

Once we start driving those costs down, if we do not then also drive down the costs of moving items across the wharves—that is, the cost of wages, the time involved, the length of time ships are idle and the large investments involved in handling equipment on the wharves—eventually they become a very substantial part of the total cost of transportation. What was being done in the workplace dispute on the waterfront was a microcosm of what the coalition tried to do in its Workplace Relations Bill and, of course, what this Bill goes against. That dispute was trying to address the issue of a flexible work force, one that could adapt to the necessary changes that were occurring on the waterfront, adapt to changes caused by technology and adapt to changes in shipping arrival and departure times because of weather disturbances and other factors. That was an attempt to control those costs.

The intent of the Workplace Relations Bill was to provide businesses and work forces with the flexibility needed to adapt to demands. It is only by adapting to changing demands that we will have efficiency in business. That is the only way we will continue to encourage investment in business. That is the only way we will get jobs. If we are not efficient, if we do not put the money into investment, then we simply will not have the productivity required to expand the employment base. This Bill is about reversing the kinds of incentives that are needed in Australia, the kinds of things we need to do in this State if we are to continue to be a strong economic force. Rather than encouraging a future vision of adaptability, a vision that allows Australia and Queensland to be at the forefront of economic development and growth to ensure that we and our children have jobs, it is very disturbing that we have a Bill before the House that will reverse that process.

That is bad not only for this Parliament but also it is bad for Queensland, it is bad for families and it is bad for jobs. There is no doubt that a key aspect of ensuring that we have a productive work force is to have a work force that actually works with the management of companies. The other key part of the Workplace Relations Act was that it tried to get companies and employees to work together. The purpose was not to set up a conflict situation, it was to set up a structure whereby management and employees could work together to solve the problems that they were facing in individual businesses and enterprises. Again, that is a particularly important part because we in the Parliament cannot set up a structure where, as I said earlier, one size fits all. Firms are different, even within the same industries. At times they face different levels of competition, different forms of competition and different demands on them. We must provide the flexibility for management and employees to get together to work out what is best for them—their industry—but, most importantly, their firm. As I said, this Bill reverses that process.

I am disappointed that we are having to debate this Bill. I think that it would have been far better if we had been able to encourage a flexible work force. It would have been far better if this Parliament was to go ahead and encourage businesses to invest not only in technical things but also in productive workplace relations in any individual firm. For that reason, as disappointed as I am in seeing the thing, I have to join with my colleagues on this side in opposing the Bill and opposing it vigorously.
