



Speech by

Mr G. HEALY

MEMBER FOR TOOWOOMBA NORTH

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WORKPLACE RELATIONS AMENDMENT BILL

Mr HEALY (Toowoomba North—NPA) (3.51 p.m.): Strange as it may seem, I always enjoy the contribution of the member for Bulimba when he speaks on industrial relations matters, because he is very colourful and speaks with great passion and vigour. Given his industrial relations background—something he shares with a few other members opposite—I can understand why he is so passionate. However, some things need to be said about what his contribution implied, namely, that there is a general feeling out there that we on this side of politics are not standing up for the battlers.

The battlers include not only the types of people referred to by the member for Bulimba, namely, the battlers from the bush who have not had an education. Battlers can be found in small business across the length and breadth of this State. The work force employed by small businesses is gradually declining, because conditions are getting tougher. Some mum and dad businesses are struggling and cannot put food on the table. They are also battlers.

Mr Lucas: Because of the GST.

Mr HEALY: The member for Lytton continues to denigrate the Federal Government's taxation reform package in this House. I am pretty sure that he does not fully understand it. There are plenty of small businesspeople in the electorate of Lytton and other electorates right around the State who are battlers and who, from time to time, experience industrial relations problems.

The new Labor Government's assault on commonsense workplace regulations has rightly been criticised by the business sector. It is business that this Labor Government and the "Braddy Bunch" want to return to the Dark Ages of industrial relations. However, it is not only business that will suffer from Labor's craven retreat to the past pursued by the whips of the big union movement. It is also the workers and, perhaps even more importantly, the next generation of workers.

The abolition of QWAs, the central point of the regressive legislation that we see before the House today, would place in grave jeopardy the continuing and successful implementation of apprenticeships and traineeships at a school level. How short-sighted and dangerous is that for Queensland's future? It is extremely dangerous. We are approaching the 21st century.

Mr Grice: It's just a rebirth of old Labor.

Mr HEALY: As my colleague said, it is a rebirth of old Labor. The Labor Party in Queensland wants to take it back even further—back 30 years.

It is fair to say that the implementation of New Apprenticeships in Queensland has been a model for many other States with school-based arrangements. It has been an absolutely outstanding success. A large part of this can be attributed to flexible industrial relations arrangements. In particular, the advent of QWAs provided the opportunity for many small and medium-sized businesses to participate in New Apprenticeships where there was not existing award coverage provided for under industrial orders—for example, in the retail, hairdressing and furniture production areas. Therefore, it is a great concern to industry that the Government's proposed changes to the Workplace Relations Act—changes that flow self-evidently from Labor's desire to toady to the unions rather than being a Government for all Queenslanders—will by eliminating QWAs discourage many employers from participating in school-based arrangements.

This is a complex area—evidently more complicated than anything that those opposite want to be bothered comprehending. The non-Labor members of this Parliament are not blinded by devotion to

the past or to one side only of what used to be the industrial divide. It would be a terrible shame if Labor's policy of retreat to the past had a heavy impact on the genuine employment-creating opportunities that flow from school-based industry training. It would be a particular tragedy if this effect of Labor's retreat were to impact hard on the regional areas of Queensland, where jobs are scarce and where the Premier's opportunistic 5% unemployment election promise is an absolutely sick joke.

The existing laws, introduced by the reformist coalition Government, apply to school-based arrangements—in hairdressing apprenticeships, cabinet making and furniture production, small business, information technology and child care. I cannot think of a list of useful training applications better suited to precisely those sections of Queensland's young community that has been sidelined by the elites overly represented in the Labor Party. It is true—and we welcome this, for we on this side are all for choice—that there are alternative industrial relations instruments available, for example, such things as separate orders or certified agreements. However, the reality—and this is the reality that is most missed by the ranks opposite—is that most small employers will not be interested in adopting these options.

They will not be interested because what business in Queensland needs, and what Queenslanders overwhelmingly need, is freedom to move and a reduction in Government interference in their business—their bottom lines, their lives. Clearly, they will not get that from this Government unless, in the instance of the workplace laws that we are debating today, the unique balance of this 49th Queensland Parliament can be brought to bear.

If this Parliament does not vote to throw out this legislation, it will be another kick in the guts for businesses across this State, the small business sector particularly, which is already feeling the effects of the Asian economic downturn and already reeling after, for example, reading in the Courier-Mail on 6 July that the Minister for Industrial Relations had announced that the Government was withdrawing the formal objection in the Industrial Relations Commission to wider Sunday trading—an objection submitted by the previous State Government as a clear message to small business that the Government of the day cared for them and for their future livelihood, cared enough to want to encourage them to employ more people and cared enough for their future so that this ideological target of 5% that the Premier espoused before the election could be reached.

I can tell you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that the businesses in urban Brisbane and in some of the electorates of members opposite—south-east Queensland and centres such as Toowoomba—who absolutely fear the continued push by the large retail chains now have no confidence whatsoever in the Beattie Labor Government as a result of this legislation. They have no confidence in draconian industrial relations policy; they have no confidence in a Government that is prepared to sit back with its hands in its pockets or in the pockets of its union mates and let business in this State rot and wither on the vine. Today's Labor is no more than yesterday's tired old Neanderthals with a bit of face paint.

The coalition is solidly in opposition to the Braddy Bill. I appeal to the other non-Labor members of this House to oppose this retreat to the past and the disadvantage to many thousands of ordinary Queenslanders that would result and to vote for a Queensland with a future. The abolition of QWAs has repercussions not only for new commencements but also for existing traineeships and apprenticeships. I understand that an order is to be developed to cover all existing traineeships and apprenticeships that do not currently have provision for school-based and part-time arrangements. The Opposition certainly supports that and I place that on record. But the serious concern that we on this side of the Chamber have is what is going to happen in the interim.

Considerable time and resources have been invested by schools and organisations, such as the Queensland apprenticeship services, to promote new apprentices in schools and to encourage industry participation. This has contributed to the success in the uptake of new apprenticeships in schools. It is fair to say that all stakeholders—and I would include the Government in this group, unless the member for Kedron wants to resign from this aspect of life, too—want this momentum to continue. However, industry is concerned that, if the transition period that the Government proposes should insert itself between the removal of QWAs and the implementation of a suitable overarching order, interest and participation in school-based new apprenticeships will definitely decrease.

Perhaps this is also part of Labor's grand scheme to provide the circumstances in which initiative and individual enterprise will be allowed to wither and die in pursuit of the communal effort that it says it desires but in fact—and I think it knows this—cannot deliver. So it is in this context that we have asked the Department of Employment, Training and Industrial Relations and the State Training Council to give consideration to allowing school-based and part-time new apprenticeships to continue in the immediate term. It certainly seems sensible and it would definitely be honourable for the Government to insist that existing arrangements continue until what is planned to replace them is able to do so.

In my electorate of Toowoomba North, many new developments in small business are exciting employment generators. It is of interest, for example, that in many rural and semi-rural areas of Queensland horticulture and other rural disciplines are two of the areas covered by award variation

and/or orders under the Vocational Education, Training and Employment Act. The people of Toowoomba North who, like many regional Queenslanders, are rightly suspicious of the big union orientation of this Government's policy, suspect that Labor's true orientation is to Brisbane and the elites. They will not be happy if the new freedom of choice that was the hallmark of the coalition's workplace relations policy is taken away from them.

Nobody in this Chamber should ever overlook the fact that in excess of 350 school-based new apprenticeships have commenced in the past 10 months. A number of these have been facilitated through group training companies which have negotiated a certified agreement with the major unions to allow for part-time and school-based arrangements. The balance have been arranged with individual employers who, again, tend to be small and medium-sized businesses and, in many cases, family businesses with close personal ties to that school community.

I know that, in a lot of cases that I have come across in which these young people have managed to get themselves one of these apprenticeships through a business in the local area in close proximity to the school, that business is part of the school community and it understands how that school community works. Obviously, there is a spin-off for that business from the parents of that school. Those businesses tend to then reinvest money in a lot of the things that take place at that school when they are asked for sponsorship. So there is a very good relationship between the school and the business community and those young people who are taking on these apprenticeships.

It is precisely at this local level—this very grassroots level which in other parts of the world would be called village level—that we must build great enterprises, and continue to build them. There is serious concern in the community—not just in the business community—that the Government's clear policy direction towards centralised control and bureaucracy, the hallmarks of the failures of the past, will again be inflicted on them. It must also be noted in this context that many small and family operated companies do not have any industrial experience. It needs to be recognised that they are not genuinely prepared to negotiate complicated arrangements for the sake of employing a school student for one day a week. "Mr 5%", the Premier and member for Brisbane Central, should reflect long and hard on that. He has a promise to keep. He will not have a hope of coming within cooee if he concedes the field to the bureaucrats, the experts who pepper Labor Party reforms and the people in the back rooms. He knows that it is these areas in which the use of the QWA has been the preferred arrangement.

I understand that at present in excess of 30 QWAs are in place, and that enables school-based and part-time new apprenticeships to be implemented in the workplace. There are more than 20 school students wanting to commence a school-based apprenticeship for whom the QWA option would provide the best vehicle for establishing an industrial rearrangement. Okay, these numbers are not large. They are not large by any means, but that is no argument for scrapping the scheme. It has only just started. It was just starting to draw away from the kerb. It has not even got onto the highway yet. I say again—

Mr Lucas: I don't think the key was in the ignition.

Mr HEALY: My word the key was in the ignition. It was just about ready to roll over and start on that path of getting those young people into those jobs and apprenticeships.

Mr Lucas: You put the coathanger in the ignition; you were trying to knock it off.

Mr HEALY: I take the interjection from the member for Lytton. What the Government has effectively done is close the door in the interim period until those orders are up and running on the prospects of those young people getting a job some time down the track with the assistance of those small businesspeople.

In introducing the coalition's reformist and advancing workplace relations legislation in 1996, my colleague the member for Clayfield 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 business, particularly small business, with the best industrial relations system possible to meet the economic challenges of the future."

Mr Grice: Our legislation was for the future; their legislation is from the past.

Mr HEALY: I think that the member for Broadwater has summed it up wonderfully well.

Mr Santoro: It was a very wise interjection.

Mr HEALY: It was a wise interjection.

The sorry saga of this legislation is that it is a bit like a bad sitcom. The title of it should be the Braddy Bunch Returns to Jurassic Park. That is exactly how the people of Queensland will see regressive legislation such as this, and the dinosaurs within the union movement—the same old tired faces who were the puppeteers of the Labor Party—will continue to be despised by the great majority of

businesses throughout Queensland, both big and small, for plunging industrial relations in this State back into the Dark Ages. As the member for Clayfield said, the Queensland public was happy with the coalition Government's industrial relations policy.

Mr Swarten interjected.

Mr HEALY: I do not have to, because they were such excellent words used by the member for Clayfield. They were words that had the business community, the employers and the employees in this State saying, "At long last we are out of the Dark Ages of Labor Party control and industrial relations." They were the words that were generating jobs. The Minister knows that the unemployment rate was falling when we were in Government. He knows that some of those initiatives that we were putting in place were working. Of course they were working.

The coalition's vision was to return to the people the basic building blocks of prosperity and a generous future. It was to provide choice of agreement making options, flexibility in the workplace, freedom of association and enterprise focus. The coalition's vision is in place. It has physical form and growing presence.

Mr Lucas interjected.

Mr HEALY: I say to the member for Lytton that I am always on a winner.

Labor wants to kill all that. This is what it calls payback time. The ALP's union minders want to take over the sandpit again. That is what they want to do. That should not be the will of the House on the numbers that the Queensland electorate has provided, and this Bill should be voted down.
