



Speech by

**Mr JIM PEARCE**

**MEMBER FOR FITZROY**

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Hansard 22 October 1998

**APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL APPROPRIATION BILL**  
**Committee (Cognate Debate)**  
**Estimates Committee E**  
**Report**

**Mr PEARCE** (Fitzroy—ALP) (12.44 p.m.): I appreciate the opportunity to take part in this debate on the report of Estimates Committee E, which scrutinised the Ministerial Portfolio Statements of the Department of Mines and Energy and the Department of Health. In the few minutes allocated to me I will concentrate on matters relevant to the Department of Mines and Energy and, in particular, the coal industry.

The department has put considerable resources into the preparation of new legislation that will repeal the current Coal Mining Act. The Minister has been working virtually nonstop with coal employers and employee representatives in an effort to reach an agreement satisfactory to all parties on the new coalmining health and safety legislation. Given my experience in the coal industry and my ongoing close association with mineworkers and their families, I am committed—in fact, you might say that I am passionate about it—to ensuring that this Parliament does everything in its power, as the legislator in this State, to provide the legislative framework that delivers a safer and healthier work environment for mineworkers. The Minister has been patient. He has been understanding and, where necessary, he has remained focused and strongly committed to achieving the best outcome for both the industry's employers and its employees. I am looking forward to the introduction of the new health and safety legislation into this place.

Personally, I have concerns about self-regulation, as it places the responsibilities of health and safety in the hands of those who, too often, put production and profits ahead of a committed health and safety regime. I acknowledge that, in today's world, the current Coal Mining Act is too prescriptive, and that there is a real need for a more simplistic approach to the writing of law for the operation and functioning of our most important export industry. However, the health and safety of our mineworkers must remain at the forefront of any of the changes to the legislative structure. We, as a Parliament, should never forget that the current Coal Mining Act is written in the blood of dead and injured mineworkers. And we, as elected members and representatives of the people, must take every precaution to ensure that we do not set the scene for future disasters in our mines.

I note that the Department of Mines and Energy no longer has a role in the administration and management of Queensland's Mines Rescue Brigades. The Queensland Mines Rescue Service is now a private company funded under the principles of user pays by the Queensland coal producers. I was most concerned when the former Government—now in Opposition—introduced and passed the legislation which allowed for the restructuring of the service. Failure by the then Government to include union representatives on the board of management was the first step towards a decline in the quality of service, and it has put at risk the ability of the Mines Rescue Brigade to continue to provide an effective rescue service.

I have no confidence in the board of management. They are employer friendly, dismissive of the needs of rescue brigade members and are lacking in a genuine commitment to maintaining an effective and efficient Mines Rescue Service. The quality and commitment of rescue brigade members

is of the highest standard, but the team can only perform to its expectation if it has the support of those who manage it. I respectfully urge the Minister to closely monitor the performance of the board of management and give consideration to how we might be able to get employee representatives on that board.

We should not forget for one minute—and I pray that it never happens—that if we do have an incident of a serious nature and the rescue brigade is incapable of doing its job because of failures by management, it will be the Government that will stand condemned. I know how I felt after the Moura No. 2 underground mine disaster of 7 August 1994, and I have to tell members that I do not want to go through that again.

I turn now to health, which has been an issue in central Queensland, particularly mental health. This is one of the issues that have been driving a mental health lobby group in that particular area. We welcome the extra \$29m in the Labor State Budget that will be injected into mental health services. It should be noted that this represents the biggest funding increase in the history of mental health. It means that we will be spending more than \$270m on mental health services in Queensland in 1998-99. That represents a 16% increase on the recurrent budget that was brought down by the coalition in May.

One in five Queenslanders will experience a mental illness or serious mental health problem at least once in their lives. People with mental health problems, their friends and families are a significant and long-neglected group of people who are getting a better deal at last. The money allocated by Labor will mean 200 extra mental health experts, including four staff for a new stand-alone facility at Emerald, which will service central Queensland, including the Fitzroy electorate.

Time expired.

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