



Speech by

Mrs J. SHELDON

MEMBER FOR CALOUNDRA

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WORKPLACE RELATIONS AMENDMENT BILL

Mrs SHELDON (Caloundra—LP) (5.26 p.m.): The changes to Queensland's workplace laws proposed by the Government are very far reaching. They are designed to re-install big unionism as the central plank of industrial relations policy in this State. It is vital that every Queenslanders understands this to be the intent—and the outcome if these laws are passed, which they should not be—of the Bill presented to the House by the member for Kedron.

Mr Fouras: So you are saying you are out to destroy unions?

Mrs SHELDON: I will take that interjection because our Bill was not about destroying unions, as the honourable member would be well aware if he was being honest. Our Bill was giving people the choice to either work through the union basis that is already there or make their own decisions in their own agreements. To refuse the option of choice leads to a situation in which unions are often used by the Labor Party, and that is to establish an entrenched basis of power for themselves. It is not a situation of looking after the worker. That shows the total hypocrisy of this whole exercise here tonight.

The Opposition will fight this craven retreat to the past because that is exactly what it is. The Opposition will fight for Queensland's future and not for Queensland's past. We should be progressive. We should be looking for the future and we should be looking at agreements that will enhance the workplace, enhance jobs and enhance a person's individual right. Our goal as a people, as a State of this great Federation, is surely to enter the 21st century with the best possible set of circumstances for what is really a very exciting era of new technology and personal freedom that is the promise of our century and the century to come.

I want to talk about the great advances for women that have been made possible by the coalition's unique and progressive workplace relations laws. I want to talk about the fate of these advances—the dreadful fate of these advances put in place by the coalition—if this back-to-the-future Labor legislation passes through this House. Queensland needs great levels of employment creation if we are to fully match the genuine and deserved expectations of Queenslanders of today and tomorrow, and particularly our young Queenslanders.

It is also the case that those opposite need great levels of employment creation if their leader, Mr Five Per Cent, is to escape severe embarrassment by non-delivery of his core election promise of 5% unemployment.

Mr Sullivan: No, he didn't. He said that he was hoping to do that.

Mrs SHELDON: He had so many positions that it is very difficult to know what he said. The original promise, my friend, was 5% unemployment and then he decided that he would shift on that, and I think it is now a target. He has realised himself that it was absolutely unachievable and he was out hoodwinking the electorate that he could do it. This is, of course, largely a matter for the member for Brisbane Central to come to terms with. His embarrassment, current or future, is not the concern of this House; the concern is the significant drag on private sector employment growth. That is what the Government's Workplace Relations Amendment Bill represents, particularly for women.

Queenslanders are energetic and innovative people. The great majority of them are not members of trade unions. In the private sector, union membership is less than one third of the work

force. Union membership—and even the member for Kedron might, in a moment of unusual clarity, recognise this—is very rarely either productive or appropriate for people who work in very small businesses or in family concerns. Yet people in both of those situations manage very well without the protective hand of Big Brother union. A great many of the people in small businesses and family businesses are women. They need great flexibility in their working arrangements. Very often they need, by virtue of their family commitments, flexibility in working hours. They need flexibility in working days, and they certainly need flexibility in working arrangements. They are the people for whom the benefits of Queensland workplace agreements are blindingly obvious to anyone, apart from the Braddy bunch opposite.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Reeves): Order! The member will refer to other members by their correct titles.

Mrs SHELDON: I used the term collectively, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Women form a great part of the Queensland work force. They form a resource that is of huge benefit to the Queensland economy. They are the leading edge of our progress into the future. Let me make it plain that the coalition parties see a very real role—a continuing role—for unions in Queensland's workplace environment. That is what I said to the member for Ashgrove. That was enshrined in the coalition's historic workplace relations reforms, which were put in place only 18 months ago. It was our policy then. It is our policy now.

Members on this side of the House stand for personal freedom that extends to the workplace. We do that in part because of the impact on women of the restrictive labour practices of the past—the practices that benefit only the big unions and the members of the industrial relations club, most of whom, of course, are male. Many working women need the sort of flexibility that is entrenched in the principle of the Queensland workplace agreement, which is the prime target—the first target—of the forces which are driving the member for Kedron on his precipitate road to the past.

All members in this House are passionate about the business of building the economy and building the jobs that must go with that greater and broader economy. The coalition's record in private sector job creation in Queensland during our term in office was the best in the country. That is a matter of pride to members on this side of the House, and it should be a matter of pride to everyone, because surely that is our mutual target: to have good employment, and good employment for all Queenslanders regardless of their age. It is certainly a record that has been of immense benefit to the great many women who have their place in the new economy that is developing around Queensland's growth as a service-oriented and highly technological sector.

We are entitled to ask: how does a retreat to the one-size-fits-all, union-dominated and bureaucratically controlled industrial environment square with the real needs—the genuine needs—of the new economy and the new operators within it? We are entitled to suggest that the answer is: it does not. We are entitled to suggest that the Government's Workplace Relations Amendment Bill in fact does nothing much about anything, other than restore protection to the big union minders of the Labor Party and, of course, the funding that goes with that. This is a partisan Bill. It is a Bill that fails the basic test of public interest. What is most shocking of all about that is that the author of the Bill, the member for Kedron, who must know this to be the case, is still prepared to return Queensland to a past that has gone in a way that will deny it and its people the full potential of the future.

The key issues in the battle to make sure that Queensland has the best possible start to the 21st century are—

higher productivity: the existing workplace laws, introduced by the coalition, provide this;

employment growth: freer employment practices and employee/employer agreed wages, introduced by the coalition, encourage this; and

better pay and living conditions for all Queenslanders: sustainable high growth rates, most achievable via freedom of choice in the workplace, stimulate this drive.

Our reforms, which the Braddy bunch want to kill off because they disadvantage big unions and their leaderships, are built on the following principles—

a commitment to freedom of choice, allowing employers, employees and unions to enter into workplace arrangements best suited to their needs—not to the one-size-fits-all requirements of the 1950s;

an emphasis on collective and individual agreements without uninvited third party intervention;

a simplified but sufficient award safety net underpinning the enterprise bargaining process and ensuring that those who remain under the award system have the protection of enforceable minimum entitlements, and this is not the blighted landscape that the Minister for Employment, Training and Industrial Relations is trying to paint;

genuine freedom of association, including the right to belong or not to belong to an industrial organisation;

an unfair dismissal regime that ensures a fair go for all and maintains and builds business confidence in engaging employees;

a system harmonised with Commonwealth legislation but which emphasises and protects the unique Queensland history of workplace relations; and

industrial disputes fell by a massive amount, because unions were unable to mount credible industrial action against coalition workplace laws that worked and that were popular.

I believe that that is one of the real concerns of members opposite: they were popular, so they want to change them and make sure that they do not become entrenched. QWAs are supported by a monitoring system controlled by the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission that is self-evidently working. The Braddy bunch know that, but it does not suit the union commissars to admit it.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! The member will refer to other members by their correct titles.

Mrs SHELDON: Labor's amendments are anti-jobs. They will discourage job creation, particularly for women who need flexible work arrangements, and pose a threat to existing jobs because they are anti-business. They will encourage jurisdiction hopping and, therefore, make IR more expensive and bureaucratic for Queensland business.

Mr Sullivan interjected.

Mr Purcell interjected.

Mrs SHELDON: Government members do not like the truth. They have never been able to stand the truth. Unless they have the protection of the big union bosses behind them, they are nothing, and they know it. They are not game to give the individual a bit of freedom.

Mr Purcell interjected.

Mrs SHELDON: I thought that Mr Purcell would want the individual to have a bit of freedom, but the BLF would not. It has never looked after the individual. It has been a union power base for industrial thugs.

Mr Purcell interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! The member for Bulimba!

Mrs SHELDON: These amendments certainly represent a back-to-the-future approach, because they return Queensland's IR system back to an emphasis on awards—the system of the past—instead of enterprise and workplace-based agreements, which are the way of the future. I suggest that this House has absolutely no alternative but to reject this very backward looking Bill.

When speaking of how important jobs are—and that is part of this whole workplace arrangement and legislation—I believe that it is a vital economic necessity for job creation that the State of Queensland and every other State of Australia reach agreement on the fundamental reform of Federal/State financial relationships. In Government, our coalition campaigned strongly for such reform. I personally was very involved in trying to reach a formula which would provide a form of greater revenue to the States so that they could meet their growing and increasing demand for services, particularly in a growing State like Queensland. We also wished not to be constantly tied to the Commonwealth's apron strings and not to be constantly going down to Premiers Conferences with our begging bowl and coming back with it half full. I think that everyone recognised the farce that Premiers Conferences had become, regardless of the political persuasion of whatever Government was in power in Canberra.

It is refreshing that the current offer that is on the table by the Federal coalition Government goes a long way towards remedying that situation and to meeting the States' requests. The tax reform package that the Commonwealth Government is now offering the people of our State and nation goes a long way towards remedying the imbalance in Federal/State tax arrangements. If it can be remedied, and if the States become more economically viable, then job growth will result.

The offer involves State and Territory Governments receiving all the revenue from a goods and services tax that would be rendered. We were certainly after a growth tax. A number of the States were seeking inclusion in income tax collection, but it is better to have a central collection agency. By collecting a tax such as a GST—an indirect tax base that covers all and catches all in its net, so the black marketeers cannot get out of paying tax as they have been up to now—that revenue base provided enables the State to be more certain in its planning, because it will have the revenue to carry out its plans. The basis of Federal/State tax reform that the Federal coalition Government is putting forth should be applauded and accepted open-handedly by any State Government, because it allows State and Territory Governments to abolish many of their business taxes that are regressive taxes. There is no doubt about that. Any overhead and tax on business causes a business to be able to afford fewer employees. The GST also ensures that State and Territory Governments are no longer dependent on financial assistance grants—FAGs—from the Commonwealth. The GST would give the

States and Territories more revenue than they receive currently under FAGs and a constant form of revenue and growth. The most obvious symptom of unhealthy Commonwealth/State relations is the Premiers Conference. By not having to rely on FAGs in the future, that would not be necessary. The new arrangements will mean the end of FAGs. Instead of FAGs, the States and Territories will receive all of the revenue from the GST. That will enable them to rely on a broad-based, indirect tax that will grow as State-based populations grow. Queensland has the highest population growth of any State. That is continuing to grow.

The GST will also ensure that there is no increase in the overall tax burden. Much has been said about the position in which Queensland would find itself. Members opposite have described that position as a position of disadvantage. The Prime Minister has clearly said that no State would be disadvantaged. The fact that we do not have a FID tax in Queensland—and that has been very important to us as a State—will continue to be the case.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! I am wondering about the relevance to the Bill of the member's contribution.

Mrs SHELDON: There is a lot of relevance, because the fundamental problem with the existing tax system and the resulting State imposts on businesses has resulted in a decrease in jobs. One of the stated fundamental principles of this workplace legislation is to make workplaces freer and more able for employers to employ people. I have always had the focus that tax and jobs are combined. One cannot consider only one aspect. It is important to consider the positives of this tax package in relation to the creation of jobs in our State.

When we have income coming in from the GST, Queensland will be able to abolish indirect taxes. Queensland has a debits tax, which is a tax on the financial transactions of businesses. The abolition of indirect taxes will produce a system that is healthier and easier to manage. Doing the books and the Budget will be much easier once there is a constant, growth income stream. The GST will also allow the abolition of stamp duty on marketable securities. That is a very important issue. As every State in the nation imposes stamp duty on its marketable securities, people often invest in companies that trade offshore. That is a disadvantage to us and towards job creation. Removing stamp duties on business transactions and bank transactions and having a fundamentally assured growth tax and increased revenue base as our State grows will give a real fillip to our future.
