



Speech by

Mr J. HEGARTY

MEMBER FOR REDLANDS

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WORKPLACE RELATIONS AMENDMENT BILL

Mr HEGARTY (Redlands—NPA) (9.10 p.m.): In speaking on the Workplace Relations Amendment Bill it is important to recognise the job creation record of the former coalition Government. More than anything, this record points to the success of the Workplace Relations Act which was introduced into this Parliament by the coalition in 1997. It also demonstrates the coalition's commitment to getting on with the job.

Job creation is one of the most important roles of Government and I would like to think that the Labor Government is conscious of that in establishing its objective of reducing current unemployment levels to 5% within the next few years. I know that the coalition in Government took this role very seriously and did more than just talk about the need to create jobs.

There is no doubt that from 1989 to 1996 Queensland suffered as a result of the repeated failures of the Goss Labor Government. That Government, despite its significant parliamentary majority, presided over some of the worst unemployment figures and some of the highest rates of industrial disputation ever recorded in this State. This came from a Government that had the audacity to claim that it was pro-business and pro-jobs.

Premier Beattie and his colleagues make the same claim. These are the same people with the same union backgrounds who got us into so much trouble in the past. "Today's Labor", as they have dubbed themselves, are no different from yesterday's Labor. The facts speak for themselves. The Beattie Labor Government is destined to follow the Goss Government down the path of unquestioned union interference in the workplace. There can be no better proof of this fact than the mere existence of this Bill.

By introducing this Bill the Labor Party has shown that it is not serious about job creation. This puts in jeopardy the new Labor Government's election strategy of job creation. It shows that the Premier is not serious about enabling our economy to compete. Significantly, it shows that the Government has been hijacked by the union movement.

The coalition's Workplace Relations Act heralded a new era for industrial relations in Queensland. During the two short years when the coalition was in office, more than 91,000 jobs were created; or to put it another way, under the coalition more than 91,000 extra Queenslanders were given the opportunity to work and to earn an income. Let us compare that with the Labor Party's achievements over an equivalent period. Under Labor, unemployment in Queensland rose to more than 11%—more than one in 11 Queenslanders were unemployed and unable to earn an income. Members opposite should take a long, hard look at those facts. Not only does the appalling record of Labor reflect on its own mismanagement of the economy but also it shows quite clearly how Labor's industrial relations policy failed.

The Premier is on record as making job creation the central plank of his Government's election strategy. Who could forget those advertisements—those that had Mr Beattie ham acting to a group of sycophantic Labor supporters? More importantly, however, who can forget the Premier's commitment to reduce unemployment to 5%—first over three years, but over five years recently. I am not sure which time frame the Premier is determined to achieve.

Mr Springborg: Do I hear a decade?

Mr HEGARTY: We start with three, we go to five. Do I hear 10? Do I hear 20?

Mr Springborg: Try a generation.

Mr HEGARTY: I thank the member. I am still not sure whether we have settled on three or five. No-one in the Government seems sure about this small detail. Regardless of whatever time is eventually agreed upon, the real crux of the matter is that the Premier has made it extremely clear that he will do whatever it takes to reduce unemployment in this State. I commend him for that commitment. Nobody in this House would dispute the worthiness of that sort of intent. But if the Premier insists on introducing legislation such as this Bill it is quite plain that he does not have the conviction of his word.

The Bill is nothing more than an instalment on Labor's debt to the unions. It is a Bill that does nothing more than restore the power of the unions to ride roughshod over all employers and all employees in this State in the determination of wages and conditions. It will return Queensland to the bad old days of union thuggery, inflexible work practices and uncompetitive workplaces. It will serve only one real purpose—the creation and entrenchment of "jobs for the boys". One thing is for sure—it most certainly will not create jobs for decent, hardworking Queenslanders.

This Bill is anti-jobs and anti-business. It is a Bill that could only be supported by a Government that does not want Queensland businesses to be able to compete at a national level, let alone at an international level. Unfortunately for Queensland, the Beattie Labor Government is very quickly shaping up to be such a Government. I find it very hard to even comprehend how any Government that claims to have job creation as a top priority could support this Bill.

Even the Treasurer, Rhodes Scholar that he is, would understand that business—private enterprise—cannot create jobs if it cannot compete efficiently. This morning the Premier was proudly claiming credit for the increase in business confidence amongst Queensland's small business operators.

A Government member interjected.

Mr HEGARTY: At the moment it is, but I wonder whether he will be crowing so loudly in six months' time. Nevertheless, when the regressive amendments to the Workplace Relations Act proposed by the Premier take effect they may tell a different story altogether. We will then see whether the Premier is so keen to claim credit or whether he is silent. It is very simple: business cannot compete efficiently if it does not have the ability to maximise the effectiveness of its work force, and by this I mean employers working with employees to determine wages and conditions that are suitable and that are agreed to by both parties.

The provision of Queensland workplace agreements within the existing Act provides employers and employees with the means necessary to facilitate the establishment of wages and conditions specific to individual employees. Under the coalition's legislation, employees and employers were able to come together for the first time and negotiate wage outcomes that most suited their individual needs. A perfect example of this is the case of a mother who, under normal award conditions, has to work 36 and a quarter hours per week. This mother, who has two young children in child care, is considering leaving work so that she can spend more time at home. As she is the only one in her small workplace in this situation, and as her employer is prepared to accommodate her needs, she is able to negotiate a workplace agreement that allows her to spend four days per week at home with her children. The same principle can apply to a father who wants to pursue other activities such as study. The principle also applies to businesses that believe that an alternative to the normal "square peg in a round hole" award system would better benefit them and their employees.

Mr Roberts: What is the name of the award that covers her?

Mr HEGARTY: The name of the award does not matter. This is a case of choice between State and Federal coverage. The Government's actions are pushing people from the State system back to the Federal system. This adds to the confusion of people in the work force and the employers.

More and more people are beginning to appreciate the freedoms and flexibility of negotiating a QWA. They are beginning to look beyond the archaic industrial relations system that the unions, thanks to the Labor Party, had protected for so long. The reality is, however, that unions do not create jobs and unions should not have the right to interfere in the work conditions of those who do not want their involvement. Unions do not have families to care for, academic studies to complete or businesses to run. Unions are essentially interested in only one thing—protecting their turf and protecting their power to influence Governments and bully employers.

A way for unions to protect their turf is to ensure that the award system remains intact. Unions are well aware that the devolution of a centralised award system weakens their power. One has only to look at the current system, with its declining union membership, to highlight that fact. Without a highly centralised award system, unions cannot dictate that each and every worker in a specific category must work to certain wages and conditions. We have heard from several members today—and the member for Gregory comes to mind—who have given examples of real life situations. The member for Callide is

in a similar situation. Those members have experienced the archaic imposts that unions dictate to the work force, which eventually results in the workers whom they are supposed to support losing their jobs through their employers not being able to sustain those unrealistic working conditions. Union officials who actually have to get out and work for their members should realise that. But it was a long time ago when they actually worked in the workplace themselves.

If the union movement was serious about representing Queensland workers, it would support the existence of QWAs. I find it hard to believe that unions do not view QWAs as an avenue for ensuring that the specific needs of members are rewarded and recognised. If one thing can be drawn from the union movement's support of this Bill, it is that unions are not prepared to fight for the best interests of their members. Unions apparently see no real benefit in trying to help members negotiate the wages and conditions that best suit their needs and most reward their abilities. Is it any wonder that the union movement can no longer claim to represent Australian workers? As I said, union membership in this country is really on the decline.

If the union movement was serious about representation, it would reflect on this grim analysis and take stock of where it has gone wrong. People in the union movement certainly would not have to rely on the existence of a centralised award system for their existence. If the same people who have been running the union movement for the past 20 years had been running a private business, they would have had to move to Majorca a long time ago. The sad thing is, however, that the Premier and the Minister are aware of this fact. They are aware that the biggest hurdle standing between them and job creation and job security is the union movement. Yet they are unwilling and incapable of acting.

Mr Mickel: Incapable.

Mr HEGARTY: I take the interjection from the member for Logan, who is interjecting from other than his own seat.

Mr SPEAKER: Order!

Mr HEGARTY: Mr Speaker, I seek your protection from the vindictive remarks of the member for Logan.

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

Mr HEGARTY: By introducing this legislation, the Labor Party in particular and the Minister for Employment, Training and Industrial Relations have put a serious hurdle in the way of the Queensland economy's efforts to continue registering record rates of employment growth. When the former Treasurer, the honourable member for Caloundra, introduced the coalition's 1998-99 Budget into this House, she said that employment growth in Queensland was 4.1%—more than double the national average of 1.8%. This record is reflected more accurately in the fact that, during 1997-98, almost 40% of new jobs created in Australia were created in Queensland. These jobs were created under a modern industrial relations framework which was established by the coalition. They were created in an environment where flexible work practices were encouraged and industrial disputes were on the way down. I wonder how the Beattie Government proposes to sell its industrial relations policy.

Mr Mackenroth interjected.

Mr HEGARTY: How will the Premier and the Minister who is so keen to interject tonight explain to potential employment-creating investors that they have decided to return Queensland's industrial relations system to the past—a past dominated by unions, industrial disputes and inflexible work practices? What they will have to offer to investors who are more inclined to set up their businesses in Victoria, Western Australia or those other States which offer a more flexible industrial relations environment remains to be seen. Maybe the Premier should just come clean and tell Queenslanders that he is really not serious about job policies. It would be much fairer for everybody if he admitted that his promise to cut unemployment to 5% was just rhetoric, that he cannot achieve it because, amongst other things, he does not have the fortitude to stand up to the union movement.

This Bill sends a very clear message to the business community. It sends a message that reads of short-sighted policy making, a reluctance to accept reform and a lack of understanding on the basic elements of how to create jobs. It sends a message also that shows the union movement is back in control along George Street. My colleague the honourable member for Clayfield has already informed the House that the coalition will not be supporting this Bill. The shadow Minister has spoken at some length on the differences between the industrial relations system that he, as the Minister for Training and Industrial Relations, tried to create and the one that Labor would like to restore. It would be timely for the new Minister to look very carefully at the differences. I can assure him that there will be a lot of unhappy Queenslanders when it is realised that the Beattie Labor Government has introduced legislation seeking to return to the union movement the keys to every Queensland workplace.

A great number of the unemployed people in my electorate know that the union movement and the award system have failed them. The same applies to the great number of workers in my electorate. In this day and age it is grossly unfair to suggest that people should not have the right to determine fair

and reasonable workplace agreements. What is more disturbing, however, is the Minister's apparent belief that unions are much better equipped than anyone else to negotiate wages and conditions. What a suggestion! It is a laughable suggestion.

With the appropriate safeguards and guidelines, such as those contained in the existing Workplace Relations Act, employees and employers who wish to do so should be entitled to negotiate specific workplace agreements. After all, this is the nineties, and we do have an increasingly informed and educated work force. By all means, let us keep the guidelines, the safeguards, the no disadvantage test and the rest, but let us remember that individuals have different needs and that what may suit one employer and employee may not suit another. This cannot be achieved by abolishing QWAs, and it most certainly cannot be achieved by providing for the award system to be the primary vehicle for determining wages and conditions.

I support freedom of choice, and I am fervently in favour of anything that is pro-jobs and pro-private enterprise. This Bill fails to come up to scratch on any of these requirements. This Bill is a sell-out to the union movement, and it seriously lets down the public of Queensland.

As to the pre-election position of the Queensland Labor Party when in Opposition, the Labor Party made it perfectly clear that, if elected, it would abolish QWAs. Imagine the alarm bells that that set off in the business community. People in the business community have to plan long term. They knew that an election was looming and that the Labor Party was going to abolish what had been set in place a very short time before by a coalition Government.

Mr Mickel interjected.

Mr HEGARTY: The member cannot interject. He is not sitting in his correct seat. He has not been here long, but he should know from his past——

Mr Mickel interjected.

Mr HEGARTY: The member should go to his own seat if he wants to interject.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! I will control the House.

Mr HEGARTY: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was looking for your direction, and I seek your protection.

The newness of the QWA provisions is obviously one thing that has confused the business community. That is one of the reasons why, to date, so few businesses have entered into QWAs. But as I said a minute ago, bearing in mind that there was an election looming, why would business move into something when there was no certainty? It was a new initiative, but a good initiative, for those industries, particularly the child care and the real estate industries. They took advantage of it because they saw an umbrella where the employers and the employees had a win/win situation. But unfortunately, with an election looming, and because of the very short time that the coalition had in office to ramp up those initiatives in the Queensland Workplace Relations Act, I can understand the reluctance of many businesses to move into it.

Mr Santoro: That will change.

Mr HEGARTY: It will change. The member for Clayfield knows what the business community wants. He consulted widely before moving to enact that legislation. Moving back from that tonight, through this regressive amendment that the Minister now proposes, will put Queensland, the business community and job creation back to where they were prior to 1996. Queensland cannot afford that in this particular economic situation. There is no way that the Labor Party will achieve anywhere near its employment target if this Bill is passed tonight. For that reason, I do not support the Bill.
