



Speech by

**Mr M. ROWELL**

**MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK**

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Hansard 27 August 1998

**WORKPLACE RELATIONS AMENDMENT BILL**

**Mr ROWELL** (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (10.41 p.m.): I rise to support the Opposition spokesman and the concerns that he has raised in relation to the Workplace Relations Amendment Bill. The legislation that he introduced some time ago was very effective. It is true that not a large number of people have taken up Queensland workplace agreements. However, sometimes conservative people take time to adjust to new situations. I believe that is the case in this instance.

It is important that we remain competitive. The member for Crows Nest, who preceded me in this debate, was discussing the rural industries that are extremely important to this State. They earn us a lot of income—approximately \$5.5 billion. It is extremely important to have flexible workplace arrangements for the many itinerant workers in those industries.

As a result of computerisation, people are being replaced by technology. We cannot stop that trend. That is progress. That is what is happening in the workplace. Technology is advancing at a rapid rate. There is a need for change. Of course, we need to work with change. We cannot stem the tide: when it comes in, we have to flow with it; when it goes out, we have to adjust our psyches. We live within a global market. More and more businesses are having to import goods for their own use. We export goods. Whether one operates in the domestic market or the export market, one certainly has to be very much aware of exactly what is going on in the world arena. Owing to our dependency on exports and the cross flow of goods that we import into Australia—such as tractors, implements and high-tech equipment—we have to achieve the balance of trade that is so vitally important. From time to time, that balance gets out of kilter. That is why it is extremely important to have very flexible work arrangements such as the Queensland workplace agreements that were put in place by the shadow Minister when he was Minister. They were very effective. If the Government could have waited a little longer before rushing in this amending legislation, I believe we would have seen some real benefits from the coalition legislation.

Many countries have work practices that are not as sophisticated as ours. If members have ever travelled to countries such as Indonesia they will be aware of the sweat shops at which people work very hard, under very difficult conditions, to make ends meet. In comparison, they are probably receiving the equivalent of \$20 per week. Their pay rates are very much lower than ours.

**Mrs Edmond:** That's what you want for Queensland.

**Mr ROWELL:** That is what the Minister says we want. She does not know what she is talking about. I think she is off the track.

**Mrs Edmond:** That's what you want for Queenslanders.

**Mr ROWELL:** The Minister might want that for the health system, but we do not want that for the workplace in this State.

The same circumstances apply in Malaysia. I spent some time travelling through Thailand and seeing the work practices in that country. It is extremely important for us to understand what we are competing against. We are competing against a labour force that has very cheap weekly and hourly rates. However, we have technology. We have to use that technology and do the best we possibly can with it. Of course, we are doing that. Our workers need to adapt to that technology and change their thinking as time goes on. We cannot just stagnate. We cannot just stay where we are. We cannot just

vegetate as some people, such as the members opposite, would like us to do. This is a matter that demands our attention.

I have spent approximately five years as a canecutter. I know how difficult it is to live in tin barracks and to have a shower by a metho heater. Has the Minister for Health had a shower like that?

**Mrs Edmond:** I'm not one of the silvertails.

**Mr ROWELL:** I am sure the Minister has not. She should have some more rhubarb because that is good for her, too.

I worked at Pinkenba at the silos. I worked on a construction site that had a great deal of scaffolding. I understand what the building industry went through in its early days in comparison with what it has been doing of late through the use of modern scaffolding. In Hong Kong one can still see bamboo scaffolding being erected at 20 and 30 storeys above the ground. We do not do that in Australia. I believe the technology that we are developing in those sectors is very important. Through their workplaces, people have to learn to adjust to take on board the new level of technology.

Let us consider specific duties, such as those performed in restaurants. Restaurants do not employ staff on a full-time basis. Their staff come and go. They need a certain level of expertise. The Queensland workplace agreements that were developed by the coalition could be extremely important for such sectors. As time progressed, I believe we would have seen more and more of them used in that particular trade. The catering trade has very similar conditions. People prepare food and go out to cook it. They work for a few hours during the day and a few hours at night. The work is intermittent. An employer can arrive at an arrangement with an employee to do those types of duties efficiently. It is always very effective to have a simple agreement. That is what the Queensland workplace agreements are all about.

We could discuss delivery services. People in that field get up very early in the morning to deliver goods. They probably work for only four, five or six hours a day. Newsagencies are another typical example. Of course the agriculture industries—as the previous speaker was saying—use itinerant labour. Their staff come and go quite frequently. Within the cane industry, during planting and harvest times we need people on a part-time basis. It is extremely important to be able to come to a mutual arrangement with those workers, rather than having to nail down the conditions in cement as the Government members want to do. Government members want to turn back the hands of time and take retrograde steps in relation to the way employers make agreements with their workers regarding how they go about their duties.

At my place we may do some spraying late at night. It is good if I can come to an arrangement with a person to go out and do this specific type of work. In some respects it is quite demanding because of the intricacy of the equipment that is being used. It is quite important that a person understands the job fully and I pay that person particularly well to do that type of work. I believe that if I could have an agreement with a person over a period, that would be very beneficial to my operations.

The coalition could see advantages in the workplace agreements for the economy, for the worker and for the employer because of their ability to implement flexible work practices. That is the essence of it: flexibility. If we get away from having flexibility in employment in the future, we are going to have a great many problems. Under the Act, employees and employers have a choice. They have the basic process of reaching an agreement on what the employee is actually going to do. In that respect, a great deal of benefit could be gained from having an Employment Advocate to assist in reaching an agreement. The agreement has to contain the basic legal entitlements of the worker involved, such as a contribution to superannuation, protection against discrimination, protection against unlawful dismissal, parental leave, long service leave and the right to come and go beyond what a union would necessarily want. All of those conditions are taken into consideration when making Queensland workplace agreements.

The Enterprise Commissioner—a very important person—verified and approved of this process. These deals are not secret; the Enterprise Commissioner would look very closely at these agreements and make sure that they had all the components that I have just mentioned that were important to the worker, that were important to the award that he or she was employed under, and that were important to his or her wellbeing. Under those circumstances, we saw only a very small number of Queensland workplace agreements. Something like 40 were knocked back, which I think is quite significant. It meant that there was really no requirement for Big Brother to be telling people what they should do.

That is the unfortunate thing about the union movement and certainly about the ALP opposite. They think that they have to control people. That is not the case. Nowadays, people have the will, the capacity and the intellect to reach an agreement that is going to be satisfactory to them. I think that we have to cut the umbilical cord, for want of a better term, and not be so patronising to the workers. We should let them make agreements that are going to be of benefit to them. Unless we do that, with the changes that are going to occur, we will lose contact with the very essence of what the workplace is all about.

Time and time again we have heard the rhetoric of the members opposite about 2,000 employees being involved in about 1,500 agreements. This has been going on for 17 months. There is every prospect that, as the shadow Minister suggested, if we let the process go for another 12 months before we start stripping these awards—and they are very outdated and outmoded—we may see a turnaround. The system will be less restrictive and people will not be inhibited from putting together an agreement. Instead, people are trying to read the fine print of all this rhetoric that a lot of the awards have in them.

As many speakers from the Opposition have said, at present the members opposite, with their 38% mandate, are in a payback situation. They have rushed into Parliament these amendments to what is a very good Act that has some great prospects in the future. Opposition members do not really understand why the rush is necessary other than the political ramifications about which we have spoken. Of course, we run the risk of having the Federal system, which is the equivalent of the QWAs, overriding a lot of what we could be doing in this State. There is a high cost to small business involved in negotiating certified agreements. It really puts it beyond the capacity of a lot of workers and a lot of employers—and particularly the employers, because they are the ones who pay to negotiate such agreements.

I would like to spend some time talking about the National Competition Policy, because I think that is quite important. Keating put the cleaner through many industries with this initiative and, back in 1994-95, the former State Labor Government was fully supportive of it. There was no doubt that many industries had to improve their competitiveness. However, this great National Competition Policy did not consider workplace relations. There was no sharing of the burden of the initiatives to improve Australia's productivity. I think that was a great disappointment. If we were going to start with a clean slate and look very closely at how we could improve productivity in Queensland and in Australia, we should have looked at workplace relations and our work practices. Without that component, we were only putting a lot of industries under pressure, because they had to work in an archaic system.

The sugar industry was put to the sword. We were lucky to maintain single desk selling. If Labor had been in power, that would have been under a great cloud of doubt. Of course, tariffs had to be sacrificed to maintain single desk selling. That was the cornerstone of the sugar industry, which is worth \$2 billion to Queensland, and had we not maintained it the industry would have been in real jeopardy. Many other industries such as dairying and chicken meat are facing deregulation under the National Competition Policy. A great deal of uncertainty is being created. I have been out to dairy farms that are doing it pretty tough. In relation to farm gate pricing and that type of thing, some of those smaller operations are under tremendous pressure. I do not think that it behoves any Government—

**Mr Veivers:** Thanks to the National Competition Policy.

**Mr ROWELL:** That is what I am talking about. The National Competition Policy, which was introduced by Labor both at a Federal level and State level, placed unnecessary pressure on a lot of people. A lot of people were doing it tough because of seasonal conditions, competition and a whole range of other issues. They were finding it very difficult to survive, and then along comes the prospect of deregulation. Families out there are in a tail spin. They have to contend with drought, they have to contend with a whole range of very difficult conditions—repayments and so on—and they really do not know where they are heading.

The taxi industry and newsagencies are also being considered for deregulation. It would be an absolute disaster if we had deregulation of the taxi industry. If that occurred, every time someone wanted to whistle for a taxi, that person would have to go out there, show a leg and hope to hell that somebody picked up that person. That is the type of thing that we can expect. That is the type of thing that we confront with this National Competition Policy. It has some good elements to it, but it has really bit into some areas and people who really do not have the capacity to cope with it are finding it extremely difficult. All that it is doing is playing into the hands of the large consortiums—those big shops such as Coles, Woolworths and Franklins—who now take about 70% of the retail trade throughout Australia. I think in the US it is about 14% and I have heard that in England it is about 25%.

Here in Australia we have succeeded in giving these big organisations a large percentage of the market because of their ability to really screw the workers and through things such as the National Competition Policy. Tonight we are talking about the workers. These large organisations are paying low wages and are making their employees work at odd times. Of course, the workers do not have to stay in the job, but in many cases these are the only places in town that really have the capacity to employ people. Of course, they get people who are prepared to work for the absolute basic wage.

Many industries are disappointed about the proposed changes. We certainly heard from the sugar industry about them. It has had some input on the issue of Queensland workplace agreements. We have heard about the real estate industry, which has been involved in workplace arrangements, as have companies involved with the gold mines in Gympie and so on.

It was interesting to hear Garrie Gibson supporting what we were doing. We on this side of the House are not alone in thinking we were going about things in the right way with workplace agreements. It is very gratifying to see the Opposition spokesman for this particular Bill in the House, giving us some support as he always does. He built me a very nice TAFE college up in Ingham—it is in the process of being built—and I am very grateful for that.

Employers generally have a whole plethora of issues to address when employing people. It does not relate solely to paying people. Employers have to get workers' tax file numbers. Getting tax file numbers from 50 itinerant workers can be very difficult. Employers have to chase up the people, and they never know whether they have got the right name. And then they have to deal with superannuation.

Time expired.

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