



Speech by

**Mr M. HORAN**

**MEMBER FOR TOOWOOMBA SOUTH**

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Hansard 27 August 1998

### **WORKPLACE RELATIONS AMENDMENT BILL**

**Mr HORAN** (Toowoomba South—NPA) (Deputy Leader of the Opposition) (8.41 p.m.): I rise to join in this debate on the Workplace Relations Amendment Bill. It is interesting that one of the first Bills the Labor Government has run up the flag, the first Bill of any real significance, is one to look after its union mates.

**Mrs Edmond:** I wouldn't say that if I were you.

**Mr HORAN:** Talk about unholy haste.

**Mrs Edmond:** There were seven pieces of legislation that you couldn't handle in two years because you couldn't make a decision.

**Mr HORAN:** Listen to old "Backflip" Mount Coot-tha over there. We saw the biggest backflip of all today when she stood up and made her ministerial statement. I was there during the election campaign when she talked about not having co-location at the Royal Brisbane——

**Mr SPEAKER:** Order! Would the member return to the Bill?

**Mr HORAN:** I am just responding to the interjections of the "Backflip" member for Mount Coot-tha.

The unholy haste with which Labor has rushed into this Parliament to repay its union mates has been absolutely amazing. That demonstrates for everyone in Queensland what the Labor Party is all about. It is about looking after its union mates. It is about looking after the source of funds, the source of staff who helped them over time. We know about the different seats in which candidates have to be in a certain union to get preselected.

My colleague the member for Callide, who spoke before me, mentioned the trade union prep school. It is interesting to look to the Government benches and see how many Labor members have come through that prep school. What a sterile lot they are. They have all come through the same channel. Tonight we are seeing this symbolic payback for the union dominance of the Labor Party. It makes us in the Opposition proud to know that we represent individuals—people who aspire to have their own small businesses, people who run major industries and people who value the people who work for them.

One of the most important things to remember when talking about employees and employers is partnerships. Any employer or business owner worth his or her salt would know that the greatest asset in any business is a loyal and talented employee. The only way employers can hold that particular work force to their business is to make sure that their working relationship is a true partnership, that they do respect the staff they have and honour their talents and that they make sure that the staff are looked after in each and every way.

The real problem for the Labor Party with this Bill is that it provides competition for the unions. The unions want to be able to go out there and sell the maximum number of union tickets, get the membership, and siphon off the percentage to the Labor Party. They do not want to have the competition of workplace agreements that set the standard, that set a benchmark, that can set new ideals and that can provide for better ways of looking after staff and better ways of making a business

successful so that it can survive with jobs that last and provide some stability of employment for workers.

We all know that times have changed. We do not have to look back too far to see that. It used to be the case that there would be a young lad at the garage to put air into the tyres and water into the radiator and so forth. There was more work about then, but now there is competition. Now at garages there is usually only someone behind a console. Times have changed, and it is important that we try to create as many job opportunities as we can, particularly for young people.

There is all sorts of new and emerging work available for people. Once upon a time it was mainly factory-type work—everyone going along on their push bikes for the 8 o'clock to 5 o'clock shift. Now there is work in hospitality and tourism. In any of the suburbs of Brisbane or in any of our regional towns there are a great many young people working in hospitality—for example, in coffee shops that might spill out on to the footpath. The retail sector involves many different types of working hours. Small business has to work in with what is happening and has to recognise the needs of consumers. There are people working in the entertainment, transport and tourism industries—people who operate buses and who may have to operate them seven days a week, perhaps 24 hours a day.

We need flexible arrangements so that people can have jobs and so that employers in small and large businesses can compete successfully. Queensland workplace agreements provide that flexibility. They provide choice. How anyone could object to workers having the choice between a workplace agreement—collective or singular— or an award is beyond me. Employers could have an award system for some of the staff where it suits or a workplace agreement where it suits. It is about flexibility and choice.

A lot of people do not want to be involved with a union because they do not need it. They can quite adequately advocate for themselves. They want to work in a true partnership with their employer. They want to see their job and the business flourish and they want to be assured that their job can last, because they know that at the end of the day——

**Mr Johnson:** They have to help the boss make a profit.

**Mr HORAN:** If the business does not make a profit, there is no business and there is no job. Then everyone is down the gurgler. The legislation we are debating tonight is about taking away from workers choice and opportunity. It is putting workers' jobs at greater risk because there will not be the flexibility to enable small, medium and large business to be more successful.

Small business today is a real battle. Many of our small businesses involve families—mum, dad and some of the kids. There would not be a small business around that would not love to put on another one or two employees. The people involved are working long hours. Often times they are forced to work six or seven days a week, starting early in the morning by collecting the produce or the goods and working late into the night and then doing the book work later that night. There is hardly a small business that would not like to put on some extra staff.

We often see Governments making a big announcement about a particular major enterprise being attracted from overseas that will employ 100 or 200 people, but we forget the importance of small business in our community. If we go through any of our suburbs and towns and look at all the panel beaters, shops, couriers, hotels, clubs, machinery repair operations, light engineering businesses and all the other businesses that are around—retail and wholesale—we will see how important small business is. We should realise what our communities would be like if we did not have small business. Queensland workplace agreements provide a way in which small business can be flexible enough to enable them to meet the harsh competition they face.

This Labor Government, which is endeavouring to take away from small business the opportunity to enter into Queensland workplace agreements, is the same Labor Government that has walked away from the Industrial Relations Commission and taken away support for small business in the area of extended trading hours. These small businesses operate six days a week. What will be in it for them if trading hours are extended? Absolutely nothing! The Labor Government does a great disservice to people who run small businesses by not advocating on their behalf in the Industrial Relations Commission against extended trading hours. We see the big supermarket chains, like great white sharks, wanting to take the lot—not just the food and the groceries but also garages, whitegoods, clothes and everything else. The family operations in our suburbs and towns are facing ever-increasing competition.

What has the Labor Government done to all of those families in the towns in our electorates? It has walked away from them and left them on their own. We will make our society better if we have families operating small businesses. Many people aspire to that sort of life. At different stages of our lives, we have all thought about how we would like to have our own little operation; to one day save up enough money to have our own business. What will be in it for such people if the expanded shopping hours come in? Just another days' work—probably another 16 or 18 hours' work—for less money. They will work longer hours for less and less because the biggest share is being snapped up by the great

white sharks—the huge supermarket chains. If anything is destroying our country towns, regional cities, the uniqueness of the suburbs of the regional cities, it is the gradual takeover by these huge chains and the gradual demise of small business.

Honourable members should speak to any of these people in small business. We used to have a lovely lifestyle in many of our towns. Fortunately, we still do in Toowoomba. However, many families would like to go to the races, netball, cricket or the footie on Saturday afternoons or the school fete on Sundays. People like to do things with their families. However, we are gradually breeding a society in which a shop has to stay open 24 hours a day. The small businesses are being ground into submission and are being made to compete with the chains. Tonight in this place the Labor Government is doing its best to get rid of Queensland workplace agreements— something that gave true flexibility to small business.

We see that there were a number of advantages for small businesses, particularly in rural communities, and their employees when we examine some of the great features of Queensland workplace agreements. I congratulate my colleague the member for Clayfield, Mr Santo Santoro. When this legislation came into the Parliament about 18 months ago, this was one of the big steps forward for Queensland. This was about Queensland being able to compete, being at the forefront, leading the way and getting the support that it needed from a Government that recognised the importance of small and medium sized business. We encouraged strong partnerships with employees, a bit of trust, working for each other and looking after each other. That was the recipe for successful business in this State and delivered the economic growth that we enjoyed.

During the term of the coalition Government we saw economic growth of some 4.5%—double that of the rest Australia. We saw the creation in Queensland of 40% of all the new jobs in Australia although we had only 18% of the population. The proof of the pudding was in the eating. It was the environment that we put in place for business that gave it the confidence to expand, put on staff and create all of those new jobs.

To illustrate how beneficial Queensland workplace agreements have been, I will reiterate the arguments that were put forward at the time of the debate on the original legislation. They were as follows—

The Workplace Relations Bill has provisions for the making of agreements not only with single employers and single employees but with groups of employees. That is good for small business, regardless of the size.

It has a provision that plays a key role in the development of a framework for encouraging cooperative workplace agreements.

More cooperative workplace agreements will lead to greater productivity at the enterprise level and, at the same time, provide greater opportunity for employees to balance work and family.

There is an enhanced ability of businesses to meet market demands. It will have a positive effect on customers and clients, resulting in improved economic performance at the enterprise level. The result of that is more jobs, particularly for young people.

It provides greater productivity and performance at the individual enterprise level. That can only lead to economic prosperity not only for Queensland but for Australia as a whole.

I have already said that these agreements have particular benefits for small business. One of the complaints of small business is the endless red tape involved in compliance. The former coalition Government endeavoured to slash red tape by up to 50%. For example, a person running a business by himself might start at 5 or 6 o'clock in the morning. At the end of the day, after the book work has been done, what would that person have to do? That person then has to go through all sorts of other rubbish.

During the day, the last thing anyone would want is for some union characters to turn up and demand a ticket. I have seen them turn up in the middle of a concrete pour. That is their favourite tactic. When everyone is tramping around in the concrete they say, "Where's your ticket?" They used to do that in Toowoomba. We knew when they would come. They always came around just before Federal and State elections. That just goes to show that their purpose was to siphon off a bit of money for the ALP election campaign.

The arguments for QWAs continue as follows—

Many businesses operate with only one or a few staff and do not currently have the capacity to change award provisions or strike up formal arrangements that will both assist their business and provide flexible working arrangements for their staff.

Larger enterprises, which at least have more capacity to facilitate changes to existing working arrangements, find that current arrangements are too restrictive, resulting in lost opportunity as market demand changes.

This results in a loss of benefits for both business and employees.

The Queensland workplace agreement system is underpinned by the award system, the no-disadvantage test and the creation of the positions of the Enterprise Commissioner and the Employment Advocate.

While the simplification of the award system will maintain a solid base of entitlements for employees, the QWA process will provide an avenue for employers and employees to put in place enhanced arrangements that can have overall benefits for everybody.

The award system will still provide a safety net for employees, but at the same time will encourage employees to become aware of and involved in determining their conditions of employment in cooperation with their employer. Is that not the way we would like to see businesses operating, that is, with both parties—employers and employees— understanding the needs of the other? That results in a happy partnership, some stability of employment and, most importantly, a successful business.

The no-disadvantage test has ensured that employees' rights and entitlements are protected, while the ability to implement flexible arrangements has meant that employers have been able to maximise their business potential.

We are entering a new era through these Queensland workplace agreements of partnerships, cooperation and flexible arrangements, which all assists job creation. Let us have a look at some of the assistance in regional and rural areas of Queensland for the putting in place of these Queensland workplace agreements. There is the Queensland Employment Advocate and the Workplace Information Unit, the District Industrial Inspectors Offices, which are placed right throughout regional and rural Queensland—north Brisbane, south Brisbane, Ayr, Bundaberg, Cairns, Emerald, Gladstone, Gympie, Ipswich, Mackay, Maryborough, Mount Isa, Nambour, Rockhampton, Roma, Southport—

**Mr Johnson:** A good place, that Emerald.

**Mr HORAN:** That is right. The offices are also located at Townsville and Warwick.

There is another aspect that shows just how important these Queensland workplace agreements are to this State. There are 125 local governments in Queensland, 100 of which have adopted Queensland workplace agreements. They can see the advantage of workplace agreements and the advantages of having flexible arrangements. They can see the benefits for their employees and the rural community. They know what they are doing. Their employees know what they are doing and have protection. They can work out something that suits their particular locality and the jobs that need to be done. If anything illustrates the success of Queensland workplace agreements and the way in which they will gradually increase in number throughout Queensland as people become more aware of their usefulness, flexibility and benefits, it is the fact that 100 of 125 local governments throughout Queensland are using them in some way or other.

Queensland workplace agreements are good for industry, small business, rural employment and for creating competition. The unions themselves are placed on their toes and will not be able to collect the cheque in the mail that comes in for the annual tickets. If they are to survive, this will make them perform. Just like small business has to compete with small business, the unions and union officials will have to be on their toes and they will have to compete with the QWAs. They will have to come up with something that the workers want more than the QWAs. They will have to come up with a bit of good old-fashioned service instead of just taking the money and siphoning it off every three years to assist the Labor Party at elections and to prop up a few of its factional mates.

The QWAs are really about choice, with protection and flexibility. It means a greater opportunity for employers to make a success of their business, to help keep Queensland strong, to help keep Queensland's economy strong, to create new jobs, to hold the existing jobs that they have, to be able to meet competition, to be able to be flexible to those businesses that work out of hours, to be flexible with their staff who have got kids or need to work at particular times and to be flexible to be able to cope with those peak times of demand compared with other times of demand in those business when there may be very little to zero demand. It is about the no disadvantage test. It is about access to a bargaining agent, which can be a union representative. It is about time to review—even after the agreement has been entered into—so that everyone can be sure that it is right, backed up by the commissioner and the Employment Advocate.

We must reject this ideology of Labor, which wants to have compulsory awards and compulsory involvement in unions. It wants to stop flexibility and stop employers and small business operators from entering into an arrangement that can only benefit their employees. We must stay in the front in Queensland. We must have QWAs. That will mean that we will be a prosperous State with a happy work force with every opportunity to reach the full potential of this great State. We can do that only by the involvement of QWAs.

Time expired.

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