



Speech by

Mr M. VEIVERS

MEMBER FOR SOUTHPORT

Hansard 27 August 1998

WORKPLACE RELATIONS AMENDMENT BILL

Mr VEIVERS (Southport—NPA) (11.01 p.m.): It is important that the coalition's industrial relations reforms stay in place. Not only do these reforms mirror Federal legislation; they are also pro-jobs. Complementary State and Federal legislation allows business to function more efficiently. An efficient business is a job-creating business. The passage of this Bill will only create more difficulties for businesses.

The coalition created Queensland workplace agreements to ensure that employers and employees could determine a package of wages and conditions that best suited their respective needs. In this modern day and age, it is absolutely imperative that employers and employees have access to flexible workplace arrangements. Under coalition reforms, employees are able to annualise both sick and annual leave. They are able to job share. They are able to make provision for banked time. Existing industrial awards do not allow employers to even offer those arrangements to their employees.

It is unreasonable to think that the Government would seek to deny employers and employees those flexibilities. It is even more unreasonable to think that the Government would force employers and employees back to a centralised, archaic and inflexible award system.

I have reasonable experience in this area, because I had to deal with the United Firefighters Union and its approach to wages. During 1997-98, under my guidance, an arrangement of industrial relations and human resource management issues was bedded down, and new awards and certified agreements were finalised. That union was not easy to deal with, but at least it did the right thing by the union members. We also bedded down the enterprise partnership, as well as funding the cost of a change to a 38-hour week. During the 18 months I was in the portfolio there was an enormous change in management through workplace reform. The entire management structure was changed. That is what we are talking about here.

Under the Government's approach, these avenues will be unavailable and they will be replaced with confrontation. We did not have confrontation. We sat around the table. They put up their ideas, we put up ours and we shot a few holes in each other's arguments. But in the end we came to agreements that were best for the employees in the fire service, so much so that morale went through the roof. At one major fire station in Brisbane, sick leave was reduced by 62% because morale went up and those guys were happy to get back to work.

I do not care what anybody on the other side of the House says, I, along with a man called Henry Lawrence, was able to make that work. It was not easy, but what the Government is doing will take things backwards. I am not saying that we in the Opposition are infallible, although the honourable shadow Minister is just about bulletproof. I think he has done a marvellous job with our legislation. Those in Government are going backwards, and that is not good.

I think it is unreasonable for the Government to force employers and employees back to that centralised, archaic and inflexible award system, but that is what the Workplace Relations Amendment Bill is all about. I was quite amazed by the Explanatory Notes for this Bill. It is hard to believe that in 1998 the Minister would even try to introduce legislation that provides for the award system to be the primary vehicle for the determination of wages and conditions. That is crazy, archaic stuff. That is like reverting to the 1800s and the cotton mills. It is hopeless.

This Bill stops the making, approving, amending and extending of any further Queensland workplace agreements. That is also crazy. Workers want to work. They want to get ahead in whatever industry they are in. I return to my example of the fire service. Those guys start at the bottom and, under the regime we implemented, in about 8 to 10 years, maybe even less, one of them could be the chief fire commissioner. There were plenty of protection mechanisms put in place. I think even the member for Bulimba would nearly agree with me on that.

Mr Briskey interjected.

Mr VEIVERS: I know a bit about it. The Government is sending a message to each and every one of us that it is not serious about job creation. This Bill demonstrates that the Government is not serious about creating an environment which fosters employment and efficiencies.

I understand that about 1,500 QWAs have been approved by the Enterprise Commissioner. More than 2,000 employees have been able to negotiate flexible workplace arrangements. Because of coalition legislation, they have been able to sit down with their employers and work out a package of wages and conditions that best suits them.

I am not going to say that there are not one or two nasty employers out there. They are there, but the commissioner is there to make sure that the employees are protected, that everything is all right and that no funny business goes on. Employees have been able to ensure that their needs are met and that their skills are rewarded. Employers have benefited, too.

Mr Wells interjected.

Mr VEIVERS: Madam Deputy Speaker, I do believe that members are not allowed to interject from seats other than their own.

Mr Foley: No wonder your nickname's "Erskine May".

Mr VEIVERS: What a cutting remark from the Attorney-General.

Mr Briskey interjected.

Mr VEIVERS: I did, too. What year was the battle of Hastings? The honourable member does not know. It was 1066. We have to help these sorts of people. And he is telling me that I do not know history! There are a few things I do know about.

Mr Foley interjected.

Mr VEIVERS: Since the Attorney-General has lost all that weight—I do not know how many kilos he has lost—he has become most active. He is looking better.

Mr Foley: You're a bit sensitive.

Mr VEIVERS: I am. When one slips back in the fold to the backbench, one becomes a little sensitive. The member for Cleveland would not know about that; he has not been forward to go back. However, if what happened this morning in the Parliament keeps going, about five or six members opposite could slip into Emergency Services; I think there is a bit of a vacuum there.

Employers have benefited also. The use of QWAs has given employers greater flexibility in the workplace. The minority Labor Government does not want to hear these facts. It does not want to know how its "back to the future" industrial relations policy will affect workers or Queensland businesses. I am told that the Government and particularly the Minister did not even have the courtesy to consult with the employer organisations before they announced the changes contained in this Bill. However, more alarmingly, the task force established to review the Workplace Relations Act did not even meet until after this Bill was introduced. That is putting the cart before the horse. As a former Premier used to say, everything has bolted before it even got into place. That is not good. It was a big sham.

The Premier tells us that he is serious about his job creation target. No doubt in his own mind he possibly is. He tells us that the priority of his Government is jobs, jobs, jobs. I have some news for the Premier: nobody, not even him, can create jobs by ignoring small business, which is the greatest employer and job generator in the State and in Australia. Nobody can create jobs by obstructing business flexibility. That is what members opposite are about—and some do not even know that. The Government's rationale for abolishing QWAs is simply wrong.

Mr Briskey: We've heard it all before.

Mr VEIVERS: No, the member has not. It is wrong because it denies existing rights to hardworking Queensland employees.

Mr Briskey: That's nine minutes. That's long enough.

Mr VEIVERS: The member has not done this; I have. I was able to negotiate great things for the Fire Service in Queensland.

Mr Purcell: That wasn't under QWAs.

Mr VEIVERS: The member should listen. He is getting a bit toey about this.

Mr Purcell interjected.

Mr VEIVERS: I come from the same——

Mr Purcell: They agreed.

Mr VEIVERS: They were all happy with it.

Mr Purcell: That's right. They agreed. That was under a QWA.

Mr VEIVERS: The Government is taking that away from them. They will not be able to do that under what his Government is trying to do.

Mr Purcell: Yes, they can.

Mr VEIVERS: No, they cannot. I ask the member to stop shouting. They will not be able to do that. The Government is taking away that right. That is the wrong thing to do, because it denies the existing rights of hardworking Queensland employees and employers. It is wrong because it will lead to a dilution of the State's industrial relations system.

Mr Foley: What do you care about all this stuff—I mean, really and truly?

Mr Purcell: You're just a pyromaniac— you burn everything.

Mr VEIVERS: Madam Deputy Speaker, I take umbrage at that and I ask for your protection. I am definitely not a pyromaniac, as suggested by the member for Bulimba. What do I care about this? I care a lot. I have been in various businesses—very successful businesses—and have formed companies employing upwards of 75 people. That is a small business.

Mr Beanland interjected.

Mr VEIVERS: I never want to go back to that. It took me 40 years to get out of those hills. If I ever see another cow the way I used to see them it will be too soon. The member opposite is writing again; he is using a pink marker. That is a real worry. I employed people and I made sure that they were happy. I put my own workplace arrangements into place. I kept asking my employees whether they were happy or needed a bit more money. If they said that they were not happy, I gave them some more money. They worked hard and were employed on a casual basis, including weekends. They were looking after sport and dealing with people who were haughty at times. Basically, I have to admit that I employed friends. But those friends worked. Business is business.

Mr Purcell: Relations, hey?

Mr VEIVERS: No, I am an only child. I am lucky to be an only child. The member should not say that I was spoilt, either. I went to the same school as the Minister who is bringing in this legislation; I boarded for six years with him. Also, I sat beside Bill D'Arcy for six years. That was something in itself. When we were going through exams——

Mr Fouras: Where did you go wrong?

Mr VEIVERS: I will tell the member where I went wrong. I had trouble when I sat beside Bill D'Arcy, because on his examination paper he used to write, "I don't know the answer to this." Unfortunately, I had to write on my paper, "I don't know it, either."

Mr Briskey: You copied off him?

Mr VEIVERS: It is a bit different today. They use computers and cannot do mental arithmetic.

Mrs Gamin: Can you use a computer?

Mr VEIVERS: Yes, I can.

Mr Briskey: What's a Nudgee boy doing playing Rugby League then?

Mr VEIVERS: If the member really wants to know, I was a flashing breakaway, but I started at 5/8 and I was able to kick with both feet. The member should leave me alone.

Nobody in this House should need to be reminded of the failure of the centralised wage fixing systems of the seventies and eighties—not even the member for Bulimba. Nobody should need to be reminded of the horrific unemployment levels presided over by State and Federal Labor Governments— nobody, that is, except the members opposite. Labor members must be living in a fantasy world—a world in which everyone is in a union and collective bargaining works. Unfortunately for them, that world does not exist. Members opposite might like to have it that way, but only about 25% of private sector employees choose to join a union. That means that three out of four private sector employees do not believe that being a member of a union is important. This Bill totally ignores that fact.

Mr Briskey interjected.

Mr VEIVERS: What an un-Christian attitude that is.

The Government is saying to three out of every four private sector employees, "You don't deserve to have a say about how much you should earn. You don't have a right to tell your boss how long you want to work for. Those friendly people from the union know what's best for you." I have news

for the Government: that is totally wrong. Unions have no right to claim that they are in the best position to represent all workers.

Mr Briskey interjected.

Mr VEIVERS: I have two children who are professionals and who are also members of the union.

Mr Briskey interjected.

Mr VEIVERS: The member can be a skite. I had only two children because we were drought-stricken farmers and I wanted to bring them up the right way.

Mr Briskey: You had plenty of milk.

Mr VEIVERS: No, we did not; we were drought stricken. My two children work in a workplace and are members of the union. One of them—and I will not say which one—has never been helped by the union once in her working life, and yet she has paid union dues. I notice that the member for Bulimba has gone a bit quiet.

Mr Purcell: It's like insurance, brother; you hope you never have to use it, but if you need it it's there. You don't burn your house down to get the insurance, do you?

Mr VEIVERS: There were a couple of times when those youngsters needed the help of the union, and the bloke was not in sight. The union representative was too busy driving his car down to the local pub to have some lunch and a drink on the workers. The member for Bulimba should not try to tell me that they do not do that.

Mr Purcell interjected.

Mr VEIVERS: The member should not try to tell me that they do not do that. That is what I do not like about this.

Mr Purcell interjected.

Mr VEIVERS: The member will get me going very seriously. One of my children asked for help on one occasion and it was not forthcoming. Does the member know why? They said, "See your Tory father." I do not like that. The Attorney can sit and stare, but he knows that I do not tell fibs in this place. They were ostracised because they were the children of a Tory member and, in the end, a Tory Minister. I did not like that. They were not protected.

There is silence on the other side of the Chamber—and so there ought to be. Members opposite ought to be ashamed. Those people worked and paid their money—\$300 or \$400 a year in membership. The union reps took it and shot it up against the wall down at the pubs, and they did not go anywhere near them. I am telling honourable members opposite that it does not go down well with me when they say that they are going to look after the worker. I have looked after the workers better than those people have, and they were not even in the union. I made sure that I looked after them. I have only two minutes remaining and I want to finish this.

It is about time that the Government accepted this fact. It is about time that the Government gave employers and employees more credit for the ability to negotiate in harmony. The Labor Party has always treated employers like bogymen—unable to be trusted—and has always been looking to squeeze an extra ounce of blood out of them. It is no wonder they get toey. As I admitted earlier, there are mongrels who employ, but honourable members opposite should not tell me that there are no mongrels on their side of the House, too, as I pointed out.

Mr Reynolds interjected.

Mr VEIVERS: No, they have to be crushed. This kind of image is quite simply fictitious. Most astute businessmen and women know that, to create a successful business, they need to invest in, among other things, human capital. They have to employ people; they have to trust them and they have to look after them, otherwise their business will fold. I have to say that not too many people on the other side of the House have been in business. How many of them have invested \$800,000 or \$900,000 of their own money and then tried to make the business work, make a profit and employ people? Not too many members over there would be able to put their hands up.

A successful business cannot afford to have high staff turnover rates or a disgruntled work force. It is in the interests of employers to ensure that their employees are happy and rewarded appropriately. If we listen to members opposite, however, we would be forced to believe that bosses use legal provisions, such as QWAs, to deprive employees of their rights. Furthermore, we would have to believe that employees were forced to sit and cop this without recourse. I thank honourable members for listening.

Time expired.
