



Speech by

Mr RUSSELL COOPER

MEMBER FOR CROWS NEST

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WORKPLACE RELATIONS AMENDMENT BILL

Mr COOPER (Crows Nest—NPA) (10.22 p.m.): Madam Deputy Speaker—

Mr Purcell: Freshen it up a bit.

Mr COOPER: What is that?

Mr Purcell: Freshen it up a bit.

Mr COOPER: I intend to do that. I have 20 minutes and I thought I would enjoy it. We are debating the Workplace Relations Amendment Bill and I think it is unfortunate that we have to debate this sort of legislation because I do not believe that this is what the people of this State want or need. This is a step back into the past and I think that is extremely unfortunate. I look at you people across there and I see a massive division between the two sides of this House. You look the same but that is where it starts and finishes. As far as we are concerned, we represent the future. The future is that the people want change and they want to be able to adapt their workplace situations to their employment.

Mr Purcell: They have had enough change and they are sick of it.

Mr COOPER: Enough change? Look at what you are doing with the changes as far as this legislation is concerned. You are turning it right back into the past. We had a very good system in place which offered a choice which was called fairness and equity. That is something that you people cannot handle. That is unfortunate because in this day and age people—regardless of what you think with your 38% minority Government—want change and they want to be able to adapt their employment to working conditions.

It is one of those unfortunate things that we get this thick-headed or pig-headed approach that you people have where you must go back to something that is owned and operated by union thugs. That is just to keep you people in employment. You talk about jobs, jobs, jobs. It is really a case of keeping yourselves and your union mates in a job.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Mickel): Order! Would the member for Crows Nest please address his remarks through the Chair?

Mr COOPER: I will do that. I want to reiterate these things because, whilst there are some on the other side of the House who have similar occupations—none rural—

Mr Purcell: I am President of the Bulimba Pony Club. What are you talking about?

Mr COOPER: I know a fair bit about your past. I will say that you came from a pretty good area originally—the Texas area. Then you came into this area where you have to wear cement boots. You changed your ways along the way and I think that is a pity.

I believe that this whole exercise is about choice. I would like to think that when we come to the most important part of this legislation, namely the vote, that we see retention of choice and a retention of workplace agreements. We are supposed to be representing the people and not just vested interests. That is what you people are about. People are sick and tired of having these changes pushed upon them. I do not believe that you have a mandate to do this. I believe that what we had in place needed to be given a further extension.

When we do return to that side of the House—which will not be too much longer—we will return to workplace agreements if they are defeated tonight. Small business and rural industries and enterprises want flexibility in order to survive and in order to have continuity of employment. I believe continuity of employment is absolutely vital to people who have jobs, who want to keep their jobs and who want to have a future. Flexibility will allow us to expand so that we have actual and real jobs, not just jobs that look after people with vested interests. I refer here particularly to the union area. This is an example of union muscle being flexed. I am afraid that quite often all we see is muscle between their ears. That is unfortunate in this day and age when we should be looking for change.

You cannot live in the past. You people seem to have a dinosaur or neanderthal image. It would be nice to think you could move with the times and do what the people want. This is sad and tragic and I think it is done purely out of vindictiveness. You say you are going to return it to what it was because you say you believe that is what the people want. That is not the case. You obviously did not listen to the people at the last election. The people want choice and they want flexibility, not just in employment but in many other things as well. You people know it.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! I thought we established earlier today that the word "you" would be out of order. If the honourable member could address himself through the Chair, as I asked before, that would be much better.

Mr COOPER: I am addressing myself through the Chair, Mr Acting Speaker. When I say "you", I am talking about the people on the other side of the House. Many, many speakers have used that terminology all the way through this debate. I want to address some of the issues that have been raised. I want to refer to farm workers and people in employment in the rural sector. These are the sorts of people who are adapting to change. It is unfortunate, Mr Acting Speaker—

Mrs Edmond: He is the Deputy Speaker, not the Acting Speaker.

Mr COOPER: What would you prefer, "Mr Acting Speaker", "Mr Deputy Speaker"?

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: "Deputy Speaker".

Mr COOPER: Thank you.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: And you are doing very well.

Mr COOPER: Good on you. Thank you very much. I will continue. Employers and employees are involved in this. People who are creating jobs or who are trying to provide jobs recognise that there is a need for change. Farms were traditionally involved with sheep, cattle, wool, wheat and so on. Now we are seeing a vast diversity of new markets, niche markets and niche products. People are being forced into these things; nevertheless, they are being very successful. These things encourage employment. I know this occurs in many industries right across the State. It is a good thing that we can find new markets, new industries and new products for people to move into.

In my electorate we have some of the traditional things such as horticulture, which is still going extremely well. These things provide employment opportunities and a lot of the employment involves casual labour. It is good for people to be able to match their lifestyles with the various kinds of employment that they need. Often that suits the employer. I also recognise that there must be flexibility within workplace agreements whereby the employee and the employer can work it out between themselves, particularly in rural industries. For example, quite often, Mother Nature and climatic conditions have a lot to do with the lifestyle and employment factors in various industries. Whether it is wet or dry, hot or cold, harvest time or planting time, the workplace changes and we have to adapt to that. There must be give and take on each side in order to make employment possible and to make the industry viable.

People have wanted these sorts of agreements for years so that they can work things out between themselves and come up with agreements with which both sides are satisfied. That is the sort of thing that people want and on which we were able to deliver. We need to be able to retain those agreements. It is not a matter of people in this place thinking that what they want would be a good idea; it is a matter of what the people out there want—the employees and the employers.

Let us take some of the traditional industries, such as the wool industry. Whether it be shearing time, joining time or whatever, all of those factors come into account and things must be done in different ways. If it is a long, hot summer, then we have to have the kind of workplace agreements whereby people can start work early, have a break in the middle of the day and then work until late. The same applies to some of the newer industries that are coming into being.

The cut flowers industry in my electorate has been enormously successful. It is a very big employer. I believe that one particular person has been involved in that industry for up to 15 years and, at various times, employs between 15 and 50 people. According to the kind of climate and conditions and the niche markets that they can pick up in Queensland, in other parts of Australia or overseas, people in the industry need to be able to adapt and have workplace agreements so that employers and employees can work together to make the industry a success. In large part they are able to do that.

Right from the start those people were asking for these sorts of workplace agreements so that they could have that flexibility and equity, which does work. But we are turning back the clock, and that is most unfortunate.

One particular person in the cut flowers industry has been extremely successful, producing up to 20 tonnes of flowers a week—proteas and Australian flora—which are being sent overseas. That person has created those markets, and the employees have joined in. Together they have formulated tremendous agreements, and the cooperation and flexibility that go with that are making that industry successful. Often one finds that people in the traditional industries, such as beef, wool and pork, are suffering because of imports or whatever. They need to consider other industries, and that is what they are doing. But with that goes a need to ensure that they have flexible agreements and arrangements that make things work for both sides—the employee and the employer. Those agreements are working extremely well.

In another case, a stone fruit grower in the Crows Nest area carved up about 100 acres at the back of Crows Nest. That land was not highly regarded as good fertile country, but the moment they started putting stone fruit trees in there—as they did in Stanthorpe—it has proven to be very successful. Apart from growing the trees, that industry involves picking, packing, processing and marketing. That grower employs up to 40 or 50 people.

Another person in my electorate has started growing rhubarb. I do not know whether you like rhubarb, Mr Deputy Speaker. Whether one likes it or not, it is a product, and many people do like it. Until recently, I believe that person was one of the largest packers and processors of rhubarb in Australia, employing up to 40 or 50 people, taking in rhubarb from other producers around the area, packing it, processing it, value adding it, and even taking out a worldwide patent on snail bait.

Mrs Edmond: It's quite a toxic product, rhubarb. It's very dangerous. You know that, don't you? You have to be careful. Parts of it are poisonous.

Mr COOPER: I like it. If it is dangerous, why does the member not have some? She should try it. As far as I am concerned, it is quite okay. The member should not ridicule this.

Mrs Edmond interjected.

Mr COOPER: The member is ridiculing it. These people are making the changes that have to be made, whether we like it or not. The Minister for Primary Industries has just come back into the Chamber. He would realise the need for changes. He should not look amazed. The Minister for Primary Industries should be catching up on this, and I believe that he is.

Mrs Edmond: He would know that rhubarb is a poisonous plant.

Mr COOPER: His mind is open, and he is flexible with these industries. I am talking about traditional industries——

Mrs Edmond: You know how dangerous it is.

Mr COOPER: Shush! I am talking to the Minister for Primary Industries.

The Minister knows that we are constantly exhorting our primary producers to look elsewhere for new industries, new markets, more efforts for employment, more opportunities for employment, more flexibility and so on, because the traditional industries are having trouble. I have been talking about cut flowers, stone fruits, rhubarb and all sorts of products and industries that do require some imagination. As well, they require some courage and cooperation between the employer and the employee. That is what I am driving at. Many people are moving in that direction.

It takes a lot of courage for people to move out of a traditional industry in which they have been involved for generations. They find it very difficult to move away. But once we can tempt them to move into a new industry and to start employing more people than they do in the traditional areas, this creates a benefit to everyone: the employer, the employee, the State, the economy—everything. That is why we need these flexible agreements—to be able to make those sorts of things work. It is not just about flexible workplace agreements; it involves choice. That is what we require, and I do believe that most members would know that. Most people will get to them eventually and tell them that this is the sort of thing that we need.

I give credit to the former Minister who introduced these workplace agreements. Of course, there was a lot of opposition to them from members opposite. But after 18 months, it is regressive to want to turn this legislation on its head and go back to the past, from which we are trying to move away in order to give people a chance. It is also vindictive. It is the sort of thing that we simply do not need.

As to other products—clean food products are in high demand in Asia. I am sure that the Minister for Primary Industries would know that, under the present conditions, that market is poised to grow tremendously in the future. We should encourage that. Many people in the rural sector are desperate to find new ways and new methods of production. People in the wool industry often go through peaks and troughs. They are in a very long trough at the moment. We do need to find in the

western areas of this State new products, new industries and new ways to go. That is not an easy thing to do, especially given our climatic conditions. But we cannot be fixed and tight on how we are going to employ people. I am not saying that we should abuse people, rip them off or anything like that; that never works, because the people will not cooperate; they will not spend. We do not get a good result or a keen work force unless they are happy. They have to be happy. They do not have to sign these agreements, but they can if they have that choice. And once they make that choice, they can get on with their employment.

Members opposite talk about the need for jobs, jobs, jobs, but they have to be productive jobs—something that provides a future not only for the people concerned but also for the industry, so that this State can prosper and progress. With that will come even more employment. That is why we are very disappointed that this sort of legislation has been introduced, especially when many industries are in trouble and new industries are finding niche markets. It is wonderful to see these things, but unless people get off the main road they never see them. There are people out there who do take the trouble and the financial risk to move into new industries.

Another industry is the nursery industry, which is a large and growing industry. Some in the industry are very successful. Some have backyard operations. But even if they are backyard operators, at least they are doing something productive for that industry in this State and this country and by creating export opportunities. Unless we can give those people the opportunity of a flexible workplace, they will not succeed. Why cut off our nose to spite our face, especially at a time when we are moving into this very difficult area of change and diversity?

We have always exhorted rural people to diversify. We have encouraged them not to have only one industry on the go but to try to have a mix with some other industries. They can take such steps if they have the flexibility, the wherewithal and the tools to do the job. Unlike the members opposite, we are aware of the damage that will be caused by passing this legislation. It is very unfortunate. However, members opposite want to make that decision and they will have to live with it. The people who will suffer as a result of this legislation will not forget that when election time comes round again. The electors will opt for flexibility.

What I have said applies equally to small business. A lot of those aspects have been canvassed throughout this debate. Small business prospers or otherwise to the extent that rural industry—the productive sector—prosperes. There is a spin-off effect for both. They have to work together. That is the atmosphere that we created. Now we are taking this backwards step into the past. It is extremely unfortunate. I appeal to the Independents and other members to recognise that they have a responsibility to exercise their vote for the benefit of the people of this State.

Time expired.
