



Speech by

Mr TIM MULHERIN

MEMBER FOR MACKAY

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WORKPLACE RELATIONS AMENDMENT BILL

Mr MULHERIN (Mackay—ALP) (9.01 p.m.): It is with great pleasure that I rise tonight to support the Workplace Relations Amendment Bill which will honour Labor's election commitment to working men and women in this State. The policy objectives of this Bill are to provide for an award system to be the primary vehicle for determining wages and conditions, for general conditions of employment to be detailed in legislation, for the abolition of secret Queensland workplace agreements and to ensure that the status quo is maintained, pending a review of the Queensland industrial relations system.

Up until 1997 Queensland workers had benefited from an industrial relations system that delivered improved working and living conditions for working men and women and their families, whilst delivering economic growth to the State via the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission and the award system since 1915. Of course, the industrial relations systems require legislative changes from time to time to reflect the needs of the worker, the employer, the community and the economy. An example of such change was the introduction of award-based enterprise bargaining. Enterprise bargaining under the award system has allowed workers, unions, employers and industry to negotiate in a transparent manner for higher wage outcomes and flexible working arrangements in exchange for higher productivity and efficiency at the workplaces across industry.

During the debate in 1997, the former Minister for Industrial Relations stated that one of the key objectives of the Workplace Relations Bill was to promote economic prosperity and welfare by encouraging the pursuit of high employment, improved living standards, low inflation and national and international competitiveness through higher productivity and a flexible and fairer labour market. However, his legislation had the reverse effect. His legislation was all about undermining the award system and increasing the gap in wealth between the rich and the poor, the weak and the strong, and giving significant opportunities to unscrupulous employers to drive wages and conditions down through Queensland workplace agreements.

During the debate in 1997, the former member for Mundingburra let the cat out of the bag when he exposed the real intention of the legislation when he said that the rationale behind this legislation was to enable Australia to compete against its Asian competitors by having a lower wage outcome in order to be productive. These remarks have been backed up by the report on the effects of the introduction of Queensland workplace agreements. In the report, the average wage increase granted under QWAs was 2.6%.

Mr Seeney: We have heard all this.

Mr MULHERIN: The honourable member will hear it again.

However, 57.8% of QWAs gave employees no wage increases. The average wage increase for a certified agreement for the same period was 4.1%, with an average wage increase of 2.9% in the awards.

Mr Seeney: It is the same speech.

Mr MULHERIN: The honourable member will hear it again.

The report also highlighted substantial erosion of employee entitlements. For example, 38.7% of QWAs increased the ordinary weekly hours, 53% of QWAs increased the span of hours, 69.4% removed or decreased penalty rate entitlements, 42.5% removed overtime, 17.9% removed annual leave, 31.3% removed allowances and 19.4% removed or decreased sick leave entitlements. This is in

stark contrast to an examination of 142 certified agreements, which found that clauses contained within these agreements focused on improvements in the workplace. In particular, clauses relating to training represented 75% of the agreements; occupational health and safety, 67% of the agreements; productivity improvements, 64% of the agreements; multiskilling, 45% of the agreements; career paths, 45% of the agreements are predominant, unlike the QWAs in which only 2% of the agreements examined contained clauses relating to increasing hours of work.

The Workplace Relations Act of 1997 was purely a union bashing exercise. It was not about delivering higher productivity and flexible and fairer labour markets or improved living standards for workers. During yesterday's and today's debate, members opposite in their speeches displayed a pathological hatred for trade unions and workers who want to participate in the trade union movement. Yesterday we heard the member for Clayfield trying—

Mr Seeney: Rubbish! We gave them the choice.

Mr MULHERIN: The honourable member does not like hearing this, but he should listen to it. Yesterday we heard the member for Clayfield trying to put a libertarian spin on Queensland workplace agreements. He said, "Why not give employees and their families a choice to decide what is good for themselves and not have a Big Brother to do the job for them?" This is in stark contrast to a response I received from the then Premier, the member for Surfers Paradise, in relation to a question on notice I put to him back in June last year. I asked—

"With reference to his comments regarding the rights of individual workers to freely choose whether they join a trade union organisation or not, will his Government amend the Primary Industries Act to outlaw compulsory membership to primary producer organisations; if not, why does he support double standards?"

His answer states—

"The statute to which I assume the honourable member is referring is the Primary Producers Organisation and Marketing Act ... which in fact was introduced by the Forgan Smith Labour Government in 1926. The Act provides for the payment of a funding levy by producers to statutory bodies established under the Act. The statutory bodies are established for, and represent the interests of producers in the sugar cane, dairy, pork and commercial fishing industries.

This arrangement ensures that the Government is able to consult with the relevant industries through a single representative organisation and that such an organisation has sufficient financial resources to represent the views of its constituents effectively and facilitate a proper and timely flow of information in both directions. The funding of these bodies by way of compulsory levies ensures that these objectives are met and provides significant benefits to all members of the industry in question.

If any producers in these industries have a specific problem with the way in which the relevant representative bodies are representing their interests, they have two main options. Firstly, they can pursue the matter through the appropriate channels within each organisation. Secondly, under the provisions of the Primary Producers' Organisation and Marketing Act, which the honourable Neville Harper introduced when he was the Minister in 1987, it is possible for 30% of the producers in any of the four industries covered by the Act to effect a review of the organisation. If this 30% petition for a poll—and a poll of the entire producer membership in the industry would be conducted by the DPI—and if 50% voted and 60% of these were in favour of the abolition, the organisation would cease to exist. This is a democratic process which is available to the membership of each of the four bodies operating under the Act, namely the canegrowers, the Queensland Dairy Farmers Organisation, the Queensland Pork Producers Organisation and the Queensland Commercial Fishermen's Organisation."

This really shows the hypocrisy of members opposite. Primary producer organisations are no different to trade union organisations. Each organisation acts in the best interests of its constituents. I ask: why does the coalition support compulsory trade unionism for primary producers and outlaw compulsory trade unionism for workers? The answer is obvious: it despises the right of workers to collectively negotiate in the best interests of their fellow workmates and will do anything in its power to prevent workers from collectively negotiating through their respective unions for fair and just wage and working conditions outcomes.

The stance taken by the coalition is hypocritical to say the least. On one hand, it wants to bash trade unionists, but on the other hand it wants to look after its primary producer mates. For the record, I say that I fully support the concept of compulsory unionism, be it a trade union for workers or a trade union for primary producers. I believe that all primary producers should be members of an organisation that is funded through compulsory levies to represent the views of its constituents and provide significant benefits to its members.

The Bill will deliver improved working and living conditions for working men and women and their families whilst delivering economic growth to the State. This Bill will bring back the cooperative era of industrial relations that Queenslanders enjoyed up until 1997. This Bill, unlike the coalition's Bill of 1997, is based on the premise of fairness and equity to both parties. I would like to congratulate the Minister on his policy initiative to abolish Queensland workplace agreements and for establishing a task force to review the State industrial relations laws and his commitment to developing new industrial relations laws that will take this State into the 21st century. I urge members opposite to support the Bill.
