



Speech by

**VAUGHAN JOHNSON**

**MEMBER FOR GREGORY**

---

Hansard 27 August 1998

**WORKPLACE RELATIONS AMENDMENT BILL**

**Mr JOHNSON** (Gregory—NPA) (4.27 p.m.): In rising to speak to this Workplace Relations Amendment Bill 1998, I have to say from the outset: what a sad day it is going to be when we see Queensland workplace agreements removed. In recognition of my colleague the honourable member for Clayfield, the former Minister for workplace relations—what a great job he did for Queensland and the workers of Queensland the day that he introduced workplace agreements in this State. Some 1,500 or 2,000 of these agreements have been negotiated to date. There has never been one repealed in Queensland. Workplace agreements in this State have been very beneficial to the workers and the businesses of this State.

The member for Lytton spoke about small business. I have to say to him that he does not understand the tender situation that small business in this State will be in once this legislation goes through. I hope that commonsense is going to prevail in this House this evening when the vote is taken on this legislation. It is going to rely greatly on the commonsense of the members of this Chamber. One of the issues on which the Labor Party went to the 13 July election was its target of 5% unemployment—over the next five years. I say to Government members: if they are trying to achieve 5% unemployment, they certainly have to change their attitude to workplace agreements, because they are working; they are solid. If they want to kick them out, that will be very detrimental to the cause.

Small businesses in this State are the secret to success. They are the secret to reducing unemployment. They will be the saviours in redeeming some of the problems faced by our youth throughout the length and breadth of this State. They will take the young people on and give them a job in their first years after leaving school. A lot of young people grow from that position. I know that my family has worked in small business and has grown from there. Small business provides opportunities not only for my kids but also for the kids of every member in this Chamber and every parent in this State.

**Mr Purcell:** Do you want to see your kids ripped off?

**Mr JOHNSON:** My kids were not ripped off. My kids have never been holders of union tickets. I have always said to my kids that while they are working for their employer, no matter how difficult the situation is, they should be prepared to give an extra half an hour or an extra couple of hours a day. Even if the money is still the same, it is a job. That job is absolutely crucial to saving the small business or enterprise in question. That is something of which I am fiercely proud. My kids have always upheld that tradition. Having come from the land myself, I understand fully how precious it is to have a job. Whether it be the rural industry that is affected or industries in small towns that are affected, QWAs are about saving jobs and then we can get to job creation.

Many of us in this Chamber know well that many small businesspeople are employing people through Queensland workplace agreements and they are working very satisfactorily within those agreements. A classic example of that is explained in this letter from L. J. Hooker. I dare say that Government members have a copy of this letter. This precise document stipulates and identifies how successful workplace agreements have been since they were put in place by the former Minister on 26 November 1996.

**Mr Lucas:** Real estate agents are worse than lawyers.

**Mr JOHNSON:** The member for Lytton is leaving the Chamber. His trouble is that he could not lace up Tommy Burns' shoelaces. Members opposite talk about the battlers. Tom Burns, the former member for Lytton, was a fair dinkum bloke in terms of what he stood for and his Labor convictions. The present member for Lytton would not know what work is all about. I can tell by the look of him that he has never had dirt under his fingernails in his life. If he returns to his seat, I will serve him right up. He and too many like him come from academia. I come from academia, too: the university I went to was the school of hard knocks. I know exactly what it is all about: busted knuckles and busted teeth. At the same time, it is about people. The members on the other side of the Chamber—and the member for Lytton is a classic example of this—do not understand what people are all about. How many people does he know who are really doing it hard at the moment, who are in small business and employing a young kid out of the goodness of their heart, so that that kid—

**Mr Welford:** Oh, get out.

**Mr JOHNSON:** The member would not have a clue. "Get out", he says. I will not get out. I am ashamed to hear the member say that. I say to the member for Lytton—

**Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER** (Mr D'Arcy): Order! It is about time the honourable member for Gregory addressed the Chair and stopped provoking the backbench.

**Mr JOHNSON:** Mr Deputy Speaker, I am referring to an interjection.

I will deal with the issue of small business. A million people are employing kids. They probably cannot afford to employ them. It is out of the goodness of their hearts that they are employing them on the proper wage structure. A lot of them are employed under QWAs. Although they probably should not be employing them while their overdrafts are going up, they do not want to see those kids who are trying to have a go end up on the scrap heap. That is what every one of us in this place is about: trying to create employment, trying to create productivity and trying to keep this State on a viable path that will be productive for the future generations.

**Mr Santoro:** You hope that we are all about that, but I don't think those on the other side are.

**Mr JOHNSON:** Absolutely. When I look around the Chamber I see that there are some very successful people on the other side, too. Yesterday or the day before in this Chamber, the member for Greenslopes was trying to take the micky out of the members on this side who have been successful in their lives. They were successful in their lives because they got out there and had a go. They did it the hard way. They probably employed people and borrowed money. I will come to the matter of borrowing money shortly.

As to consultation on this legislation—I refer to a letter from Clive Bubb, the chief executive officer of QCCI—

"There has been no consultation by Minister Braddy with employer organisations before these changes were announced and we hope that with future workplace relations changes we will see a greater level of consultation and co-operation with business. It is interesting to note that the Taskforce set up to review the Workplace Relations Act had not been given the opportunity to consider these two major industrial issues and in fact it did not meet until Saturday 8 August 1998, after the Bill was introduced."

What a slap in the face that is to employer organisations. What a slap in the face that is to business. What a slap in the face that is to the people in the productive sector who are out there having a go.

The only consultation this piece of legislation has had is with the unions themselves. This legislation is very non-productive. It is a detrimental, draconian effort. I ask the Minister to please take this legislation away and consult with industry. That is precisely what he has to do to get it right. The unions are not the ones who borrow the money to grow business and to create employment. They are not the ones who have to pay back the money. The structure of workplace agreements, the agreements between the employer and the employees, is working well and proving to be productive. Let business get on with the job of creating a quid and letting this State develop and progress. It is the employer, not the employee, who every month or every six months has to worry about the interest and redemption payment.

**Mr Lucas:** The GST—they have got to worry about that.

**Mr JOHNSON:** I will come to the GST, too. It is the employers, the owners of the businesses, who are the people who have to find those dollars every month or every six months to pay the wages, the interest and redemption and the superannuation to keep those people—kids like ours—in a job. They are trying to be responsible and to make an honest profit without being interfered with by bullyboys in unions. There is probably no other member in this Chamber who has had more experience with bullyboys in unions than I have. I have seen a long line of them in the shearing industry. A lot of those heavyweights within the union are the blokes who are telling this Government today how to do it.

**Mr Lucas:** I will back Bill Ludwig in a blue with you.

**Mr JOHNSON:** I will come to Bill Ludwig. I know Bill Ludwig fairly well. I probably knew him when the member for Lytton was in nappies. I know all the fellows like Bill Ludwig, Errol Hodder and Dudley

Watson. I can go back through the line. I remember an incident at a shearing shed at Woolbuna, my place at Quilpie, just after my old man died. I was 23 years old at the time. One of those blokes came to the shed. He got there at about 8 o'clock in the morning. He walked up and down the board. He said to the boys, "How many of you have got union tickets?" About seven of them did not have tickets. He pulled the work in that shed until those blokes bought a ticket. It was not in his time; it was in my time. Until I wrote a cheque for \$700, work in that shed did not start. He had no invitation from me, but he stayed all day, ate my tucker and then stayed the night.

**Mr Lucas:** How many pay increases did you give them that the award never ordered?

**Mr JOHNSON:** Mate, the pay increases always came. That is something that you cannot accuse me of, old mate.

**Mr Lucas:** Only because the award told you to.

**Mr JOHNSON:** I will tell you now, mate, all my contract staff——

**Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER** (Mr D'Arcy): Order! I ask the honourable member to address members of the House by their correct titles.

**Mr JOHNSON:** I will run out of time if I keep taking interjections from fruit loops like the member for Lytton.

The point I want to make is that that very afternoon that same bloke came down to me on the bank of the waterhole where I was pumping water and asked, "Have your ringers union tickets?" I said, "I don't have any ringers here; they are contractors", and I said, "and I am not writing out any more cheques for bludging union blokes like you", and I added, "Get going."

They are the blokes who have really caved in businesses in this State and this nation. They have put business on its knees. I say to members opposite that they were in Government from 1989 until when the coalition took over two and a half years ago. Talk about looking after the workers! While I was the Minister for two years and four months, I had deputations from railway unions and other unions affiliated with the transport industry. Those union people told me that they could never get through their Minister's door when the Labor Government was in power for six years and two months. Never did they get through the door! They had to get an invitation.

**Mr Sullivan:** Rubbish.

**Mr JOHNSON:** Rubbish be damned! Again, the member would not have a clue. Members opposite did not want to know because those people were trying to get a fair go for their men. The only thing that those blokes opposite are doing is skimming the cream off the top so that they can be kept in the lifestyle to which they have become accustomed. I have to say to them that every union ticket that is purchased in this State helps to keep them in their lifestyle.

**Mr Seeney:** Ripping them off.

**Mr JOHNSON:** That is perfectly right. They are ripping them off. I do not know how much union tickets cost now—\$250, \$300, \$150; whatever. That will pay for the tucker for an average family for a week if they live in Brisbane. If they live in Quilpie, Birdsville or somewhere like that, it will pay for only a couple of days worth of tucker, because of the cost involved.

**Mr Mickel:** What about the GST?

**Mr JOHNSON:** I will come to the GST and talk about that. Mr Deputy Speaker, you might think that I am getting away from the debate——

**Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER** (Mr D'Arcy): Order! I hope the GST is relevant to the Workplace Relations Amendment Bill.

**Mr JOHNSON:** It is relevant. I refer to the Queensland Rail fuel bill of \$55m for 90 million litres of fuel. A GST will save the railways \$22.5m. That means keeping jobs in QR. While that lot opposite were in power—the members who are the champions of the workers—in six years and two months they got rid of 8,000 people from Queensland Rail. Under the coalition's administration, 200-odd people left through natural attrition.

I say to members that we are in a very, very vulnerable situation. We talk about the Asian crisis and the Premier talks about getting the unemployment rate down to 5% over the next five years. I say to members that everybody in the Opposition will certainly be working very closely with the Premier to make sure that we can get the unemployment rate down. Nobody wants to see the unemployment rate come down more than the Opposition. However, I can assure members opposite that this legislation that they are trying to put through the House is certainly going to be detrimental to getting that unemployment rate down.

I say to the Minister responsible, Mr Braddy, that we are talking about creating jobs, not creating unemployment. I believe that we have to be very careful as we progress into the 21st century. We have to find the marketplace. The Government created the new portfolio of State Development and Trade and talks about jobs in the mining industry, jobs in the rail industry and jobs in the pastoral industry. A couple of days ago we passed the Native Title Bill. I have to say that many people out there are on

their knees because of the trying economic times that have been brought upon us by the economic crisis in Asia and some other parts of the world.

Members opposite have to remember that this State and this nation are involved mainly in primary industries. We are not price makers; we are price takers. That makes us very vulnerable. I ask each and every member of the Government to show some thought and understanding for the people in business or for the people who are paying wages and who are endeavouring to employ people. Being an employer myself over a period, I can tell members that employers would rather have a couple of extra hands than be shorthanded. A lot of people are in that predicament. They would rather have an extra man or an extra two men, whether the operation is a mustering camp, a fencing camp, a transport plant, a tank sinkers camp, or whatever. It is always better to have more staff than be understaffed, because that is when the injuries happen. That is when problems set in and that is when productivity goes down.

**Mr Lucas:** You didn't need a QWA.

**Mr JOHNSON:** QWAs worked very well. While I am talking about QWAs, I refer again to Clive Bubb's letter, which states—

"Over 1,500 QWAs have now been approved by the Enterprise Commissioner. These cover in excess of 2,000 employees, and many QCCI members have availed themselves of this type of agreement."

**Mr Braddy:** 0.2%.

**Mr JOHNSON:** Mr Braddy knows that it is working.

**Mr Braddy:** Ha, ha!

**Mr JOHNSON:** I will take that scoff from the Honourable the Minister. The one thing that I think he should remember is that not one of these Queensland workplace agreements that the former Minister put in place has failed. If anyone wants to talk about the Queensland——

**Mr Braddy:** Read the report.

**Mr JOHNSON:** The Queensland concept has not failed. If the Minister wants to talk about what has failed, he should talk about the Federal concept, not the Queensland one. He is talking about the Federal one. The Minister can talk about all the reports he likes but the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

**Mr Braddy:** The proof is in the report.

**Mr JOHNSON:** I have read the report.

**Mr Lucas:** You have ignored it.

**Mr JOHNSON:** No, I do not ignore anything. The members opposite are ignoring it. They have ignored it from day one. In relation to the legislation, they had no consultation with the people who care or with the people who are really doing it the hard way and who are endeavouring to create employment.

The coalition Government's industrial relations reforms were fair. They supported individual rights and freedom of choice whilst at the same time protected those who were most vulnerable in the work force. They are the people whom I think the members opposite have overlooked throughout. The coalition is aware that there are vulnerable people in the work force. We do not want to see people thrown on the scrap heap. I have said it before and I will say it again: the people on this side of the House represent the workers. We are the ones who care about the workers. We are the ones who have created productivity, and we will continue to do so.

---