



Speech by
**Hon. BRIAN
LITTLEPROUD**

MEMBER FOR WESTERN DOWNS

Hansard 15 April 1999

WORKCOVER QUEENSLAND AMENDMENT BILL

Hon. B. G. LITTLEPROUD (Western Downs—NPA) (3.15 p.m.): In rising to speak to this WorkCover Queensland Amendment Bill, I am very conscious that, all too often, the people who report the doings of this House concentrate on the extremes. I suppose that we are guilty of hyperbole a fair bit of the time, but there is really more common ground here than we might imagine. Members on both sides of the House have spoken about the need for a workers compensation scheme. We now have to finetune it to come up with the best possible system. All members embrace the idea of people having safe workplaces. We all embrace the idea of people being protected, be they employers or employees. We all hate the idea of having people who cheat on the system. I was listening with interest to the member for Fitzroy, who said as much. There are all sorts of stories that members can tell from their own experiences in their own electorate offices, but I will tell just one that is a bit humorous.

I had a bit of a wag come into my electorate office one day. He was having trouble getting workers compensation money through. While I was getting the details from him I said, "What do you do, mate?" He said, "I work in a sawmill. I'm running out of money. I haven't had any money for a while." Here he was with a strapped-up right wrist. I said, "What have you been doing while you haven't been working?" He said, "I've been out riding in rodeos." I said, "What? Right-handed, riding in rodeos?" He said, "Oh no, my left hand is all right." So he was riding in rodeos left-handed while he was making a claim on an injured right wrist. Similarly, there are all sorts of sad cases.

I was listening yesterday when some members were commenting on the capacity of the people who work within the WorkCover offices across the State. I was most impressed with the people in the Roma office. A constituent of mine, a stockman, still suffers from severe head injuries. I was quite impressed, after making representations on behalf of that young fellow, at just what lengths those staff were prepared to go to try to help with his rehabilitation and negotiating with the local district health management. By and large, we are all trying to do the right thing, but we obviously have differences of opinions about various aspects of the legislation.

Last week, I was talking to the mayor of one of the councils in my electorate, and he expressed disgust that it seemed that those who are privately insured, including the Local Government Association of Queensland, were still going to face a 10% surcharge on their premiums. Members can imagine my relief today when I read that small paragraph in the Courier-Mail stating that the Minister has indicated that the surcharge is going to be dropped from the local government private insurance scheme. I welcome that decision. It shows commonsense. Those people faced the reality that, with premiums going up severely under the Goss Government and then with the recovery of the financial situation that we inherited, the money that they were spending on their workers compensation premiums could have been put into improving services and roads. That forced them to go into their own private system, and they felt that it was most unfair that they were going to face a continuing excess surcharge whereas the WorkCover system was not going that way. I congratulate the Minister on realising that, and that measure is now in place. I will be speaking to that mayor tomorrow. No doubt he probably has already heard about the Minister's decision but, if he has not, I will relay the message to him. He intended to take it up with the Darling Downs Local Government Association.

When this Bill was introduced to the House, I listened intently and took note of the printed material that was sent out, alerting people to what was going on. I noticed that it was claimed that there

would be enhanced benefits. That sounded good. Then I noticed that there was to be a 10% reduction in premiums. I recall that, because we were rescuing the scheme from its financial problems; we had delivered on a reduction in premiums, and this was going to continue. I thought that was good. Then I started to realise that it was pretty hard for all that to add up; that if the benefits were going to be enhanced and the premiums were still going to come down, I had to look at it more closely.

My memory goes back to 1989, when the first Minister in the Goss Government who looked after workers compensation was Nev Warburton. Not long after he became a Minister, he changed the membership of the Workers Compensation Board and greatly enhanced the benefits to workers. I believe that was the time when many people in Queensland believed that the system was getting out of hand. I suspect that the members of the board took decisions that were not as smart as they could have been. The board, of course, was working under the legislation. We arrived at the situation which has been alluded to by so many speakers on this side of the House. When the member for Yeronga was in charge of the portfolio these problems started to manifest themselves.

I remember that when I was sitting at the Cabinet table the coalition had to set aside \$35m a year for three years in an attempt to rescue the fund. That money could have been better spent in electorates around the State. Some of that money could have been used to build a TAFE college in Dalby. Dalby has twice been promised a TAFE college but has missed out in favour of Beenleigh and Richlands. Money could have been spent on airconditioning in schools. The Minister for Public Works and the Minister for Housing, who has just left the Chamber, boasted about airconditioning schools in north Queensland. I hope he does the same for schools in the Roma area. Last night I was listening to the member for Cunningham, who is obviously under pressure from his constituents in Goondiwindi who also want airconditioning in schools.

The former coalition Government spent \$105m over three years in rescuing the Workers Compensation Fund. That says little for the skills of the previous Labor Ministers who were in charge of the scheme. It also says little for those people who were appointed to the board by Nev Warburton.

Employers are still concerned that we might have a situation where we will again run into financial problems. As I said, the scheme has already been propped up by the expenditure of \$105m over three years. Is that going to happen again? Employer organisations, including the QCCI, and local government representatives have been expressing the same fears. We have to ensure that the system works more effectively.

We have all been made aware of abuses of the system. The member for Bulimba obviously has a deep understanding of these matters. A lot of members opposite cut their teeth on industrial matters and union matters. The member for Bulimba instanced two construction companies and pointed out that the smaller company was paying premiums and the larger one was not. That is something that we have to stamp out.

On the other hand, we have to consider the situation of the men working for Arco at the Gordonstone mine. One employee went to school in Chinchilla but I do not believe he learnt much. He found his way into employment with Arco and his fellow employees have said that he was never known to work on a weekend and was never known to work a night shift. The employment agreement at the Gordonstone mine allowed for unlimited sick pay. This sort of employee has to be removed from the system so that jobs can be retained for employees who are fair dinkum. We must avoid the situation where employers are paying excess premiums. We must also deal with employers who are avoiding paying premiums.

Yesterday, the member for Nudgee stated that the Government was going to become much more adept at ensuring that all people paid their premiums.

Mr Braddy interjected.

Mr LITTLEPROUD: Yes, he asked the Minister for Employment, Training and Industrial Relations how he was going to do it. He was told that it was an activity-based premium collection model. It is only a proposal. The Minister will have to ensure that he collects premiums at a better rate than has been done in the past. I put the Minister on notice that I will be watching closely.

The member for Fitzroy jogged my memory with regard to the frustration of workers. He referred to a medical practitioner who does not seem to be performing very well. My experience in my electorate is that there is frustration because the medical profession has to wait until such time as there is stabilisation of the injury before the claim can be processed. Members of the medical profession cannot jump in too early and make a wrong diagnosis. As a result, workers are out of pocket for a long time. I do not know how we are going to get around that. I am sure that the administrators of the scheme and the medical advisers are working on this aspect. Hopefully that can be finetuned. Medical science is improving and it may be possible to obtain some surety with regard to the permanent level of disability.

I suspect that Government members will be under a certain amount of pressure from their constituents because of their affiliation with the trade union movement. Government members have a

tendency to be biased towards union demands. Employers have demonstrated a tendency to try to paint a picture that is not quite true. As legislators in Queensland we have to try to finetune the system. I am yet to be convinced that we can increase benefits whilst at the same time reduce premiums. This matter was mentioned by my colleague the member for Clayfield and I join with him in opposing the legislation in its present form.
