



Speech by

## Miss FIONA SIMPSON

MEMBER FOR MAROOCHYDORE

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Hansard 15 April 1999

### WORKCOVER QUEENSLAND AMENDMENT BILL

**Miss SIMPSON** (Maroochydore—NPA) (10.12 p.m.): It has been very apparent during debate on this Bill that members of the Labor Party are not interested in hearing the views of others because they have made up their mind; they have the most extraordinary tunnel vision. The debate is a nuisance to this can't do Government and this Minister for Industrial Relations. That is evidenced by the fact that this Government spent a lot of taxpayers' money on advertising workers compensation changes, even before it had put those changes to the Parliament.

Why should non-Government members want to debate the issue, they ask. Do they not know that the Labor Party not only allegedly possesses the soul of the community but also—and Monty Python might like to hear this—it has found the Holy Grail? Honourable members opposite should know that the issue of social equity is not one that is confined to their side of politics. They certainly know that many people other than themselves have a contribution to make to community debate—not just in this place but outside it, throughout Queensland.

This Government, which has now held office for nearly 10 months, is allegedly the consultative Government. It must be; we have been told it is ad nauseam—in taxpayer-funded ads, I might say. I would like to take honourable members through some of the history of Labor consultation on exactly this issue—the issue of workers compensation—so that we can all understand what consultation really is. Actually, I seem to remember John Mickel, the Labor member for Logan, saying that consultation was for losers. Obviously that is the attitude of this Government as well, because the job creators in this State are the losers and, as a consequence, Queensland workers also are losers.

Honourable members will recall the howls of outrage from the business community when the honourable member for Kedron produced his grand scheme for wrecking WorkCover and retreating from the prudential advances made under the coalition's reforms. According to some members opposite, the consultative process that had been undertaken was an example of excellence. Oddly, the thunderous applause that the Minister and others heard greeting their great grasp of democracy turned out to be a chorus of dissent in the community. No matter—in the eyes of the Labor Government that dissent could be ignored. The dissent was only coming from the people who pay for WorkCover. It is apparent from this sad little piece of legislation that lies limply on the table that the people who actually have to front up with the money, that is the job creators, are absolutely the last people who should have any say at all in what goes into law.

The Labor Party has never learned. It will never learn. How do we know this? By reading the Kennedy report and listening around town to the people who, while central to the process of workers compensation, were promised full and meaningful consultation by the late and unlamented Goss Labor Government and who found that it did not eventuate.

If we go back to October 1995—after Goss Labor had sucked the lemon but before it had spat the dummy—we find that the Government of the day was prepared only to fiddle at the margins of the problem that its misplaced social conscience had created. What is happening under this Government with this Bill is exactly what happened under the Goss Labor Government. Benefits are being increased; premiums are being decreased through the removal of the surcharge. The same old detrimental equation that was adopted by the Goss Government—the brains trust that sent the then workers compensation scheme into almost total bankruptcy—is being pursued again by the Beattie Labor Government. Labor will never learn, but the coalition will never forget.

Back in 1995, under Goss, when the same mad scheme was being implemented, Queensland businesses found the then Government's attitude to employers to be dismissive. It is to the credit of Queensland's business community that, despite being dismissed from debate by the backroom clones who knew it all and their political frontmen in the Cabinet, it was still prepared to actively and constructively contribute to the review then taking place—within the limits imposed by inadequate time and information, of course. That goes without saying.

In November 1995, when the business community started voicing its impatience with the lack of consultation, Queensland businesses were told by the then Minister that she hoped they would appreciate that the reform issues in question had been very difficult to negotiate as a result of the varying interests of stakeholders in the scheme—not including business, apparently. They only pay the money. It is interesting that the Minister who left behind a multimillion-dollar disaster in workers compensation has now taken on the Health portfolio. One has to say that Labor Governments have consistency when it comes to mismanaging other people's money. Queenslanders should be afraid. They should be very afraid. In 1995, in the interests of achieving a lasting and viable resolution of the workers compensation problem, business wanted—and this is entirely reasonable—the Government to include employers in the development of any proposal presented to Parliament. It would like to do that in 1999, as well. Labor will never learn.

After Labor got back into power last June, courtesy of the de facto Labor member for Nicklin, it got out the axe—just as we knew it would. It took the axe to the WorkCover board—just as we knew it would. It axed board chairman Frank Haly and two other business oriented directors. At the time of these executions, the honourable member for Clayfield, as shadow Minister, warned that Labor's self-serving restructure of WorkCover risked turning the State's workers compensation scheme back into the drain on public funds that existed before the reforms instituted by the coalition. It was plain then, and it is even plainer now, that the switch back to a union-influenced board and the projected expansion of grounds on which injury claims may be made, the wider definition of what constitutes a worker and the review of the self-insurance provisions would open the way back to the black hole from which the coalition had to rescue the scheme in 1996.

Queensland business, which was subjected to a 48% rise in insurance premiums during the Goss Government years because of Labor's inability to deal with workers compensation on a commercial basis, had every reason then to be apprehensive of further substantial compensation imposts on their profitability. They have even more reason to be alarmed today.

It is no wonder that businesspeople are asking whether the Beattie Labor Government in general and the honourable member for Kedron in particular are interested in the long-term health of the private sector. We on this side of the House share those fears. Labor's promise that it would return the WorkCover scheme to the position it was in before the coalition came to power in February 1996—one of the many electoral bribes it offered to its special interest constituencies—truly shows that the party has learned nothing from the past.

This Bill opens the way to a drain on WorkCover reserves. That is an absolute tragedy. It is also dangerous ultimately to the Budget because, as we know, taxpayers had to put their hands in their pockets quite considerably to help fix the mess that Labor had left behind.

The Government's own paper acknowledges the difficulties associated with the changing work force, for example in the area of contract employment—not without coincidence one of the chief areas that concerns the big union bosses, who are Labor's de facto kitchen cabinet. The paper notes—

"Since the first workers' compensation legislation came into effect, Queensland has experienced enormous industrial and social change. For example, technology has seen many jobs replaced; the workforce is becoming more transient; an increasing number of positions are becoming temporary under contracts or placed through labour hire agencies; places of employment are shifting to include off-site locations such as the family home and workers are demanding more flexibility."

That is a fair summation of the history. What a pity the Government could not steel itself to actually get to grips with the resulting policy imperative. Labor will never learn, but we will not forget.

Many of the difficulties could be overcome if the Government were both genuine and genuinely consultative and if the expertise and direct interest of Queensland businesses were employed in the search for solutions. There is some evidence that the Government is capable of listening. That evidence lies in the Government's decision to amend its own amendments in the area of self-insurance. It deserves commendation for listening to responsible arguments in this regard and for agreeing to the amendments which have been foreshadowed. That said, self-insurers still have some concerns. It is to be hoped that, now that daylight has penetrated a little into the Government's closely closeted rooms, it will see the light in other areas.

Queensland has reason to be concerned about these changes, having regard to the track record of this Labor Government—its track record in regard to overregulation in the business sector and

in regard to blow-outs and black holes within the workers compensation scheme. It cannot serve the workers if it bankrupts the workers compensation scheme, if it bankrupts the WorkCover scheme. Somehow we have to get the message through to the Labor Government that it cannot constantly have its hands in the pockets of taxpayers to make up for its mismanagement. The workers of Queensland do care about the appropriate management of what is their resource—a program that is there to look after the best interests of Queensland.

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