



Speech by

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WORKCOVER, LOCAL GOVERNMENT; POPULATION, RURAL COMMUNITIES

Mr HOBBS (Warrego—NPA) (11.09 p.m.): Tonight I wish to speak about two matters: firstly, the impact of WorkCover changes on local government; and, secondly, the impact of the population drain on rural communities.

In relation to the impact of changes to WorkCover on local governments, the former coalition Borbidge Government made careful, well thought out changes to WorkCover legislation to clearly define the rights and responsibilities of employers and employees and to encourage organisations to become self-insurers. Proposed Labor changes threaten to undo the advances made and plunge employers such as local government into legal uncertainty.

Following the recommendations of the Kennedy inquiry, the coalition tightened up the definition of the term "worker" in the context of workers compensation to mean an employee who was a PAYE taxpayer. Planned changes will remove the reference to PAYE taxpayers, creating a grey area of personnel who operate somewhere between direct employment and independent contracts. Local governments and other employers will face difficult assessments of the legal status of personnel.

In fact, even contract arrangements will need to be carefully examined to ensure that they do not, under Labor legislation, amount to an employment relationship, with the local government bearing increased responsibility for any injury. Changes to the definition of "injury" will also remove the onus on the employee to demonstrate a strong link between an injury and the workplace, encouraging false and vexatious claims.

Labor even proposes to limit the number of organisations that can obtain licences to be workers compensation self-insurers. Evidence suggests that self-insurance by organisations delivers significantly more benefits to injured employees, but Labor stands opposed to it. Labor proposes to require self-insurers to meet as yet unspecified workplace health and safety standards to renew their self-insurance licence in May 2000. Self-insurers are doing a great job looking after their employees, but are flying blind in the face of meeting standards which have yet to be defined.

If the Government sets impossibly high standards and allows local government and other employers no time to meet the standards, it will be employees who suffer. Proposed changes in the review process will lengthen and complicate the process. Currently, both employers and employees have 28 days to appeal against decisions made on workers compensation claims.

Reviews are currently conducted by correspondence and documentation. Proposed changes would see the period for an appeal to be lodged changed to three months and the process changed to include the right for the employee seeking the review to be heard in person. While this may seem a fair change, it will simply create a court-like atmosphere and create yet another opportunity for lawyers to feed off the system. The last thing we need to encourage is a culture of litigation in Australia in which little is achieved except the creation of work for bureaucrats and lawyers. The whole process will be drawn out, disadvantageous to employers and without any discernible improvements for employees with legitimate claims.

I wish also to speak about the current Government's obsessive focus on the south-east corner of the State to the detriment of all inland Queenslanders. A steady population drain is threatening many small towns. Mining and farming are not the labour intensive industries they once were. The flow-on effect from the loss of just one family in a small town can mean the loss of a teacher, which in turn means the loss of another family. The effect snowballs and everyone suffers.

Rural and regional towns need to turn to service industries to generate employment. Towns which could thrive are being left to stagnate because the Government is failing to capitalise on their potential. There is tourist traffic to take advantage of. Local business areas need to be revitalised to stem the flow of locals driving to bigger centres to do their shopping. Recreational facilities need to be provided to overcome the fly-in, fly-out culture that is especially prevalent in mining towns.

Areas rich in natural resources are becoming poor in human resources because services are inadequate, so people do not want to stay. For instance, Mount Isa suffered a population decline of almost 9% between 1991 and 1996. It is naive to think that a modern mine is enough to sustain a city. A \$3m capital investment in mining generates many millions in income for the State but just one job. Imagine how many jobs a similar investment could generate in tourism or recreational services.

Primary industry and mining remain the backbone of this State's economy, and the residents of the towns and districts which support these industries deserve to live in vibrant communities with the same opportunities and facilities their city cousins enjoy. Relatively small grants can go a long way in a small town. Mitchell, in my electorate of Warrego, is an example of how far a relatively small amount of funding can go. A joint initiative was undertaken by the Booringa Shire Council and the previous coalition Government to dredge sand from the Neil Turner Weir. A State Government investment of just \$400,000 over two years has generated jobs, will restore the recreation and irrigation potential of the weir and provide a valuable resource in the sand and gravel that the dredging operation is delivering. Local governments across Queensland are keen to revitalise their communities.

Time expired.
