



Speech by

JEFF KNUTH

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

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INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS BILL

Mr KNUTH (Burdekin—IND) (11.31 p.m.): I have studied both the industrial Bills, and I must say that I do think that the Opposition Bill has more fair and just merit. However, there is one section of the Government's Bill that interests me greatly. I have noticed that the Bill, starting at section 176(1), refers to secret ballot. This is a very important issue in the workplace, especially in disputes where union members must decide whether they should or should not strike. The Government cannot pretend for a minute that it is unfamiliar with the concept of secret ballots. All of us in this House are here because we were successful in a secret ballot—a process we rightly call democracy. It baffles me why secret ballots were not introduced years ago to address the intimidation, bullying tactics and fear of retribution that has hung over voting union members for decades.

I have been approached by company owners, union members and former union leaders who wholeheartedly support this move. Secret ballot will shoot down in flames those strike actions launched by minority interest groups at the expense of the majority—a majority who often, through the public voting process, dogged with fear of reprisals, votes against their hearts and minds in fear of being labelled a scab, as clearly happened in the recent Sun Metals dispute.

In my electorate, a young man landed a job as a boilermaker in a sugarmill and joined the union. In this environment, votes during union meetings are taken by asking motion supporters to move to one side of the workshop and non-supporters to the other. A fellow boilermaker told this young man that if he wanted to avoid grief in the workplace he was best to follow the crowd in votes, regardless of what he actually believed. Is this the kind of process we want as a foundation for decisions that underpin this State's economic stability and wellbeing? Let me make this very clear: I believe in the worker's right to strike.

Mr Pearce: You don't.

Mr KNUTH: Why don't I? I am actually backing your Bill, and you are criticising me. That is how ridiculous you are as a member of Parliament.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Reeves): Order! I remind the member for Burdekin that——

Mr KNUTH: Mr Deputy Speaker, will you remind the member not to interject?

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! I remind the member for Burdekin that he should speak through the Chair.

Mr KNUTH: I am sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker. Let me make this very clear: I believe in the worker's right to strike. But it is very clear that a more democratic system of voting for industrial action must be introduced at places of work. Show-of-hands voting is a failure. Let us not forget that people like meatworkers work alongside workmates with sharp knives. Builders have huge cranes hovering above them. Boilermakers have forklift drivers shifting tonnes of metal about them. These workplaces can be intimidating, and there is no question that intimidation is used to influence public voting.

I ask members to cast their minds beyond this Parliament House and their parliamentary offices, where the workplace dangers are little more than a paper cut or two. The vast majority of Australians go to work to make money, not just to strike. A good day's work for a good day's pay is all they really want. Yet the vocal minority are all too often able to create industrial chaos. What possible argument is there against secret ballot? We in Australia have grown up with this democratic process in our local, State

and Federal elections. I am not trying to introduce anything new or confusing here. The reply in the past from weak-minded political leaders has been that it is none of our business. How can anyone make that absurd statement when so much painstaking organisation by hardworking, tax-paying employees, employers, contractors and staff is thrown out of whack by the actions of a few no-hoper, drifter-type, loud-mouthed radicals?

The idea has already been instigated in some union votes by vote organisers with the sense to replace the radical with rational. However, do not be fooled that secret ballot will be adhered to in a union workplace environment. For a very minimal cost, secret ballot can be achieved by simple voting cards with "Yes, I do want to strike" or "No, I do not want to strike on this issue". They can be photocopied at most workplaces. How can anyone debate the cost of a few pieces of paper compared to the social and economic costs of rash, ill-founded, drawn-out strike actions?

A vital condition that should be added to this Bill is that the employer—the factory manager, owner or whatever—must be able to address the union meeting to put forward the employer's point of view before the ballot is taken. The majority of meetings are held at the place of work anyway, so surely the owner or the proprietor should have this right. This way, the workers get a first-hand account of the dispute and not just a view relayed by a one-sided union delegate. This condition is just as important as the ballot itself. Members should understand that I do not for one instant suggest interfering with the worker's right to strike. That right is not disputed. What is disputed is the equity of the current voting process.

Ms Nelson-Carr interjected.

Mr KNUTH: Is the member against secret ballot, too? I believe that secret ballot, if enforced correctly, will avoid hundreds of misguided strikes brought on by a handful of troublemakers.

Mr Nuttall: Hundreds of strikes?

Mr KNUTH: Hundreds of strikes, yes—that may happen or have happened in the past. If earlier Governments had given workers a fair system to control their destiny, unions would not be considered dodgy operations, and enterprise bargaining or workshop agreements would have been unnecessary.

Let us set the example for other States and pass an industrial relations Bill that stands for equity in union management and says "no" to bullying between union members. As a society, we do not tolerate bullying in our schools, in our homes or in the workplace. What I must ask the Minister is: can he guarantee that secret ballot will be enforced at all sites contemplating strike action? The reason I ask this of the Minister is that secret ballot was included in the previous industrial relations Bill. Even though it was not as clearly defined, it did exist but was not enforced. Can the Minister guarantee this House that, under this new Bill, all unions will adhere to a secret ballot and will not allow a minority or a union delegate with his own personal agenda to override this clause of the Bill that includes conducting secret ballots? I think that members on both sides of the House stand united in saying that we all want to minimise industrial strikes so that we can attract and encourage investment and industry. This section of the Bill stands for equity and union management. Just because we are politicians and are not on a workshop floor, overseeing a building site or operating a crane does not mean that we can deny workers at the industrial coalface a fair go. If one believes in democracy, one must approve a secret ballot as the only legitimate form of voting.

There is another issue I want to raise in this House. I have just received this information from the Internet, thanks to my good friend from the Tablelands. It is headed, "Homosexual debate rages in Qld Parliament." It says that the Queensland Government has been accused of promoting homosexual relationships. I agree that the Queensland Government is promoting homosexual relationships. I believe that any member on that side of the House who calls himself or herself a practising Christian—

Government members interjected.

Mr KNUTH: It is here.

Mr Feldman: Table it.

Mr KNUTH: I will table it later. Any member on that side of the House who calls himself or herself a practising Christian will hang their heads in shame. I tell members opposite that they can hide amongst their fellow members but they cannot hide from the Father of Creation. I will read further from this article. It says—

"For the first time, same sex couples and their families are set to receive equal rights under reforms to industrial relations laws, which are being debated by parliament."

Same sex couples do not have families. They cannot have families because it is unnatural.

Government members interjected.

Mr KNUTH: No homosexual can ever give birth, so it is not natural.

Government members interjected.

Mr KNUTH: No, they can't.

Government members interjected.

Mr KNUTH: They can't. I have never heard of it.

Government members interjected.

Mr KNUTH: They can adopt families. It is very sad that they can do that. This article further says—

"National Party MP for Callide, Jeff Seeney, says it is inappropriate because most Queenslanders believe homosexual couples are immoral."

I am honoured to share the same side of this Chamber with the member for Callide. He is a true Queensland. He is a true, moral, upright man. I am proud to have him on this side of the House. He stands for morality. I am not going to allow the media to denigrate this man, because he is standing up for what is right in this State. I give him 10 out of 10 for that.

Government members interjected.

Mr KNUTH: The document continues—

"He says it is apparent the ALP's left faction forced the changes upon a reluctant Premier."

I do not know whether that is true. We would know that only if we received an admission from the Government side of the House.

Government members interjected.

Mr KNUTH: I see members on the other side of the House are stacked against me. I am sorry, I did not realise that they are that sort of people.

Mr Nelson: The good people of the Tablelands—

Mr KNUTH: The good people of the Burdekin are not that way inclined. During my campaign all the sugar mills in the Burdekin supported my stance on anti-homosexuality and anti-abortion. I campaigned quite heavily on those matters. I won over those sugar mills. They were supposed to be Labor strongholds. Why have these people shifted their voting preferences? They have done that because they are sick of this rubbish that is coming from this Government. They are sick and tired of the rubbish that the ALP is pushing on them. Morality is a lot stronger in the electorate of Burdekin. It is a lot stronger than issues that are coming from the Left Wing, or whatever wing of the multiple wings of the Labor Party.

Government members interjected.

Mr KNUTH: I am astounded at the influence of the Left Wing. When one votes Labor, one votes for the whole party—not for the Left Wing or Right Wing. Labor has been using that cop-out for years. If one votes for Labor, one votes for the whole lot, no matter who they are.

I stand up to be counted as one Queensland who has stood up for morality in this State. I do not care what the media does in an attempt to destroy me or denigrate me. I will stand up for what is right. I will stand up for what Almighty God created. He created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.

A Government member interjected.

Mr KNUTH: Is that the only thing the member can get on me? Is that all he has found out against me in the whole time I have been in this Parliament? The member has come up with the most critical thing he can say about the poor old member for Burdekin, and that is that he wanted to paint a bridge pink. Is there anything else that the Labor Party would like to put on me tonight? Have I done anything else? What have I done wrong?

Mr Reynolds interjected.

Mr KNUTH: Go on, hurl your accusations.

Mr Reynolds: Scurrilous accusations!

Mr KNUTH: Can the member for Townsville prove me wrong? I am having scurrilous accusations thrown at me. Accusations are being hurled at me, none of which those opposite can verify because they cannot come up with the goods. Those opposite run on scare tactics. The Labor Party Government has no substance. Those opposite thrive on minority Left Wing groups—greenies, lefties, just name it.

What amazes me is that the Labor Party gained Government on 37.8% of the vote. Talk about Sir Joh's gerrymander! How did the Labor Party get Government? That question has to be asked.

Mr Reynolds: How did you get in here?

Mr KNUTH: I won my seat. I earned my seat, just as much as did the member for Townsville. I earned my seat just as any other member of this House earned his or her seat. Some inherited their seats but I earned my seat. I will win it again because I stand up for what is right in the Burdekin.

I want to turn to some of the issues in this Bill, but firstly I want to talk about the coalition's Workplace Relations Bill. The Opposition's legislation provides as follows—

"The QIRC is required to ensure that a safety net of fair and enforceable minimum wages and conditions is established and maintained. In establishing and adjusting the safety net, the QIRC must consider the need to provide fair minimum standards in the context of living standards generally prevailing in the community, and give particular attention to the needs of the low paid."

That sounds pretty good to me. It continues—

"In making awards the Commission also has to have regard to the need to prevent and eliminate discrimination. Furthermore, as part of the award simplification process, the QIRC will review awards to ensure that they do not contain discriminatory provisions.

Awards will represent a comprehensive level of safety net protection. They retain all the key matters relating to an employee's pay and other entitlements eg. annual leave and leave loadings, personal/carer's leave, long service leave, penalty rates, ordinary time hours, allowances."

It sounds like a just Bill. It goes on to deal with certified agreements. It reads—

"... be explained to employees in a way that is appropriate to their particular circumstances and needs (the Bill provides examples of persons with particular needs including women, persons from a non-English speaking background, and young persons)—clause 25(5).

Include procedures for settling any disputes which might arise during the agreement's period of operation

Not be discriminatory

Pass the no-disadvantage test

Be approved by a valid majority of employees.

These conditions all help to protect employees and the QIRC must be satisfied they have been met before it will certify an agreement.

Employers are prohibited from discriminating between unionists and non-unionists when negotiating an agreement."

An honourable member interjected.

Mr KNUTH: I do not know how this is going to affect any workplace. The honourable member raised a good point. I do not know how the Government's Bill will affect the workers. I think that they are going to reject it on the grounds of homosexuality. I will have to wait until I get back to the Burdekin so that I can ask the people in the workplace. The document states further—

"QWAs must:

Be explained to employees in a way that is appropriate to their particular circumstances and needs (the Bill provides examples of person with particular needs including women, persons from a non-English speaking background, and young persons Clause 84(3).

Include a disputes resolution procedures

Contain the provisions about discrimination prescribed in a regulation

Pass the no-disadvantage test (see below)

Be freely entered into by employees."

By the way, this is what the Government is missing out on. I must admit that the conservative's industrial relations Bill was definitely a better Bill.

Mr Pearce: I thought you supported our Bill.

Mr KNUTH: No, I supported only one part of it. Where that part comes from is a mystery, but I will not go into that.

Mr Pearce interjected.

Mr KNUTH: I did tell the members that I did support that section of the Bill.

Mr Reynolds: Which section is that?

Mr KNUTH: That was the section relating to the secret ballot. I agree with that. I will give the Government credit for that. That provision was overdue and I think that it is going to help reduce industrial unrest, especially in my electorate and the member's electorate, which is in close proximity to mine in relation to Sun Metals.

Mr Reynolds interjected.

Mr KNUTH: It will. The document states further—

"Both CAs and QWAs must pass the no disadvantage test before being certified or approved. The no-disadvantage test will ensure that employees entering into agreements are not disadvantaged by the agreement in comparison to their award conditions taken as a whole. (In a situation where the parties are seeking approval of a QWA when there is an existing CA—and the CA does not contain a provision allowing a subsequently"—

Time expired.
