



Speech by

Mr JIM PEARCE

MEMBER FOR FITZROY

Hansard 2 March 1999

GORDONSTONE MINE DISPUTE; MEMBER FOR FITZROY

Mr PEARCE (Fitzroy—ALP) (11.45 a.m.): For years in this place I have been speaking about the impact of the Federal Government's policies and industrial relations legislation on central Queensland towns but no-one has been listening—not even National Party members of the Opposition who claim to be the champions of the bush. Given the chance to defend rural and isolated communities with actions greater than voter-friendly rhetoric, the National Party has failed. Those opposite attack my right to stand alongside my constituents. They attack my right to choose how I do that. It is a matter of choice. One Nation Party members sit in this place today because voters feel that their elected members have let them down. I represent my electorate and I am prepared to stand up and have my say. It is my choice to do that.

The attack on me today by National and Liberal Party members of the coalition shows that those opposite do not care about rural towns; they do not care about the declining population; and they do not care about the closure of businesses and the withdrawal of services. Those opposite are more interested in protecting the big end of town. The coalition is big on showing its hatred for coalminers and their families. We have some five members sitting on the other side of the House who have coalmining communities in their electorates. Those opposite hate the coalmining unions so much that—

Mr JOHNSON: I rise to a point of order. I find the remarks of the honourable member for Fitzroy offensive. I ask him to withdraw his remarks about members on this side of the House not standing up for rural communities and coalminers and for being anti-union. I have asked at all times that the CFMEU enter into negotiations with regard to the Rio Tinto jobs.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Reeves): Order! The member for Gregory has made his point of order.

Mr PEARCE: The honourable member is offended because I make it very clear to the public that if he is not prepared to defend the rights of his constituents, that is his problem and he has to live with it.

Mr JOHNSON: I rise to a point of order. I find those remarks offensive and I ask the member for Fitzroy to withdraw them.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! The member has asked for the remarks to be withdrawn.

Mr PEARCE: I withdraw. In these communities, small businesses are closing and families are going bankrupt. It is important to note that services which have been made available to rural producers through the coal industry are now under threat. Not one National Party member has expressed a genuine concern about the Rio Tintos of this world. These companies do not care for the people of the regions from which they mine the resources. I am determined to support my former workmates and their families in their struggle.

Mr JOHNSON: I rise to a point of order. I find that remark offensive. I represent the people of Gordonstone in my constituency. I ask that those remarks be withdrawn.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! There was no personal reflection.

Mr PEARCE: I will defend my former workmates and their families in their struggle to defeat the attack by Rio Tinto on the rights of workers to get their jobs back and to be members of unions of their choice. I totally reject the behaviour of Rio Tinto. I stand with my constituents on this issue. I am not

going to hide under an office desk because I am a member of the Government. I will do what my constituents expect of me as their local member. I will go in fighting for them, even if that action puts at risk my political career. My stand at Gordonstone was as a result of concern for the community within my electorate and the many other rural towns that are dying because the lifeblood of those communities, that is, the people, are moving out. These are towns that National Party members talk about but fail dismally to actively support.

My electorate takes in a big slice of central Queensland. I have lived in small rural communities. I went to school in those small rural communities. I know the lifestyle. I know the sincerity of the people. I talk to my constituents in the shopping centres, the schools, the hospitals, the hotels and at sporting events. I see marriage breakdown and financial ruin. I see alcohol abuse. I once travelled several hours late at night to talk to a man contemplating suicide. That was the worst drive of my life. I did not know what to expect when I walked through the door. I know these people. I am one of them and I care about them. Jobs are disappearing, lives are being destroyed, communities are falling down, school numbers are dropping, health services are not being utilised to the expected levels, and wives and partners feel that they have no future in many of these towns as they lose friends and opportunities for sporting and community involvement. Perhaps I am becoming a bit emotional and distressed about this issue, but I cannot forget for one minute that these are my constituents. I am committed to them and I do not care what I have to do to support them.

Perhaps we should take a look at the real reason for the attack on unions by the Federal Government and the multinationals, and that is that unions deliver higher wages and conditions. Howard and Reith tell us that there is a need to deunionise Australian workplaces. They say that that is a requirement for increased productivity. Australian Governments and conservative politicians need to look very closely at a report published in a recent issue of Scientific American. Opposition members should not get too excited about this, because the report was not commissioned by the unions. The unions had no input. It was commissioned by the New York Federal Reserve Bank and Tufts University in the US. After surveying 1,500 workplaces, it was found that companies that use unionised workers are 27% more productive than those that employ non-union workers. This report makes the likes of Arco, Rio Tinto and their conservative mates Howard and Reith look pathetic in their attack on the Gordonstone workers.

This work force has broken world coal production records—the same work force that cannot now get a job at Gordonstone. Members should let that point sink in. They have proven that with the support of management they can produce the coal. At the Crinum mine, operated by BHP, the unions and management are working together. They are working as a team and are proving that they can produce coal and be a very cooperative and productive organisation.

The findings of the report of which I spoke expose Rio Tinto's real purpose. With the help of Reith, they are determined to dramatically reduce the wages and conditions of mine workers and eventually the Australian work force. The end result will be a massive pool of cheap labour, where workers will cut one another's throat to get a job. We have to look further than just at what is happening at Gordonstone. The problem in this country is that we look only at what is happening today. We have to look further down the track and see what this is all about. It is about reducing the wages and conditions of workers and lowering standards so that the attack can then be refocused, not just on the workers from the coal industry or the wharves but on every other worker in this country. If the standards of one section of workers are lowered, the door is opened to reduce the wages and conditions of other workers.

The examination last year by the US Bureau of Labour Statistics of wages and conditions for union members and non-union members doing the same work in the same place found that, on combining the value of wages and conditions, union members on average received 40% more than non-union members. And therein lies the issue. Deunionise the workplace and the way is opened for an assault on all wages and conditions. The scabs at Gordonstone are committing an unforgivable offence against the future quality of life for Australian workers and their families.

The Emerald community is caught up in the propaganda of Rio Tinto. Businesses in Emerald will one day realise that they have been conned by mine manager Hannigan—a man paid a big wage to destroy the lives of workers and their families, to shut down businesses and to reduce that town's population. For years I have been saying—and I will keep standing in this place saying this—that if the work force is taken out of the community, it impacts on everybody who lives in that community. It is no good our speaking in this place and in the media about the demise of rural communities if we do not have the guts to stand up and fight for all of the communities and the people we represent. This fellow at Gordonstone is a temporary Queensland. He will move on. In the years ahead, the businesses and I will still be there, but Hannigan will move on. After he has done the damage, he will go off and hide under a stone somewhere and the people of central Queensland will be left to clean up the mess. I am not ashamed of standing up for the people in my electorate, and I will continue to do so in this place and at the grassroots level in my area.