



Speech by

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**COAL MINING SAFETY AND HEALTH BILL
MINING AND QUARRYING SAFETY AND HEALTH BILL**

Mr MICKEL (Logan—ALP) (3 p.m.): Firstly, I would like to thank the member for Charters Towers for the courtesy extended to me earlier. He was most gracious and I do appreciate that.

The mining industry is a significant contributor to the Australian economy in general and the Queensland economy in particular. However, the industry is under financial pressure and we need to recognise that. For example, in its outlook to 2003-4 the March Quarter 1999 Australian Commodities, which is produced by the Australian Bureau of Resource Economics, found that Australia will be an important contributor to the expected growth in global minerals supply over the medium term. Australian mine production is forecast to grow significantly between 1998-99 and 2003-4 as production from recently commissioned new mine developments and others at advanced stages of planning reach full capacity. However, overall earnings for Australia's minerals and energy exports are projected to fall by over 9% to \$36.7 billion in real terms between 1998-99 and 2003-4.

In Queensland, the mine that is at an advanced stage of development is Pasminco's \$840m Century mine. In other words, as the honourable member for Fitzroy knows, low world prices have already led to the closure of some high-cost mines and processing facilities and, unfortunately, Queensland cannot escape those cost pressures. So according to forecasts, output of coal over the next few years will be a modest 9%, but the production of liquid natural gas is projected to rise by 28%. The pressure is on the industry not only to be nationally competitive but also to continue to be internationally competitive.

From time to time, we hear people express concerns about the National Competition Policy. However, in the gas industry it is working to Queensland's benefit. The central reform, namely, the natural gas pipeline access code developed by all States and Territories, creates a legally enforceable right for people to gain access to the services of natural gas pipelines at fair and reasonable prices. As a direct result, it was encouraging to attend that milestone ceremony, the gas agreement for the AGL/Chevron pipeline—that \$5.5 billion project from Papua New Guinea to Queensland. Yesterday I was delighted when the Deputy Premier informed the House that large companies such as Woodside Petroleum and Santos are already showing a significant interest in that wonderful project. As the Minister knows only too well, it is an outstanding prospect for regional economic development in Queensland.

As an aside, such developments also put pressure on all energy sectors to be efficient. I notice, too, that after the commencement of the competitive wholesale market in electricity in Queensland in March 1998, wholesale electricity prices fell by around 23%. Opponents of competition policies in all export areas of the economy should contemplate some of the benefits being given already to Queensland energy consumers and projects that will create jobs in regional Queensland.

However, these achievements, particularly in the energy sector, do not have to be made—and I stress this—at the cost of the safety of the employees in the industry. An important feature of the proposed legislation is the establishment of an advisory council to advise the Honourable the Minister on safety and related issues. These are tripartite in nature and should allow a wealth of experience and knowledge to focus on safety and health problems. The safety and health of people who work in the mining industry are important to us on this side of the House. We are very pleased that we have people

such as the honourable member for Fitzroy, who has a wealth of experience in the industry, and someone such as the Honourable the Minister, who represents all of those miners in the Mount Isa district and who represents them very, very well.

The sobering fact is that over the past 23 years there have been four major coalmine disasters, and in the past 20 years there have been 56 deaths in the mining and quarrying industries and 49 deaths in the coal industry. Each of those events leaves a deep, emotional and psychological scar on those close-knit mining communities.

Mr Schwarten: And very expensive to the community.

Mr MICKEL: Absolutely. We can all remember those stark images on television of the Honourable the Premier when he was out at Moura. The local community wanted the Premier to inspect the mining memorial that had been built for those lost miners. We all remember the trauma experienced by those people, who are still going through it some years after the event. We on this side of the House unashamedly see it as our obligation to do our best for those communities and for the families who earn their living in this industry.

Mr Schwarten: It's also good economics to do it that way.

Mr MICKEL: As the honourable gentleman points out, it is also good economics. It is often ignored that these families are increasingly the economic wealth of small country towns and are vital in the development of provincial cities throughout Queensland.

This legislation includes imprisonment as a penalty for breaches of obligations that lead to death, grievous bodily harm, bodily harm, or exposure to substances likely to lead to death or grievous bodily harm. I am advised that these penalties are equivalent to those contained in the Workplace Health and Safety Act. I stress that this penalty and any penalties imposed by the court system are subject to appeal and impact only in the most blatant cases of neglect.

These two Bills are the single biggest changes to the legislation controlling safety in the mining and quarrying industries since the proclamation of the current Coal Mining Act in 1925. The Government has a responsibility to monitor the industry and to require changes to improve safety or to remove health hazards where necessary. These Bills seek a balance: they place obligations on all of those involved in the mining and quarrying industries from the employees to the company directors. The legislation also gives rights to those exposed to risk to take steps, when they honestly believe that the risk is beyond an acceptable level, to reduce that risk.

As I pointed out, the industry is undergoing massive change, which has been brought about by circumstances beyond Australian shores. In Queensland, we have not been immune from any downsizing in the coal industry. I know that from time to time the honourable member for Fitzroy informs this House of the trauma that those families are going through; often they have to relocate to other areas. We are responding to world demand for commodities and we know that in the commodity-producing areas, they are doing it tough. However, doing it tough does not mean that we have to sacrifice safeguards. These Bills ensure that the Government is honouring its obligations to people working in the industry.

I commend the Minister for his ongoing commitment to mining families and for his diligence on their behalf. These Bills deserve the support of the House. I thank the Minister and his staff very much for the briefings that they have given us and also for the contribution today of the member for Fitzroy, who is an absolute champion for those mining areas. That is in stark contrast to what we heard from the Opposition spokesman earlier today. I commend the Bill to the House.
