



Speech by

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Hansard 24 March 1999

SUN METALS DISPUTE; GORDONSTONE MINE DISPUTE

Ms NELSON-CARR (Mundingburra—ALP) (6.50 p.m.): I rise in support of the State Government's moves to resolve the disputes at the Sun Metals and Gordonstone projects. The Opposition is brave indeed to claim that this Government has a can't do record in relation to the Sun Metals project and the Gordonstone coal mine. We need only look to Peter Reith and the Federal Government's approach to disputes to see the real can't do, won't do approach. As we all know, the Gordonstone dispute is a Federal matter, falling under the jurisdiction of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission and is therefore the responsibility of the Federal Government. Even though it is a Federal matter, the Federal Government and Peter Reith are not interested in fixing the problem they have created. They are too busy trying to tell the Queensland Government what to do.

Recently, Queensland was graced with the presence of Peter Reith, who took time out to criticise the ongoing reform of Queensland's industrial relations system and challenged Queensland employers to opt out of the State system and move to the Federal industrial relations system. This would be a bold move by Queensland employers based on Reith's non-interventionist approach.

Peter Reith has stated that the Federal Government will not intervene in the Gordonstone dispute and that it is the employees' and employer's problem. This shows Reith's and the Federal Government's absolute contempt for the employees and the employer and the community who are suffering as a result of this dispute. In total contrast to Reith's "I don't care" approach to the two-year Gordonstone dispute, the Premier, Peter Beattie, wants the three and a half week Sun Metals dispute finished, and finished quickly. The Premier has developed a comprehensive strategy for its resolution that focuses on conciliation and mediation, not conflict as in the Federal model.

Although Reith-style legislation, which sadly was adopted by the former Queensland coalition Government, purports to facilitate more cooperative workplace relations and support the economic prosperity of Queensland and Australia, the opposite is the case. Gordonstone is not the only major dispute created by the Federal Government's industrial legislation. Indeed, a succession of disputes has occurred in the Federal jurisdiction in the coalmining and maritime industries in Queensland.

From January 1998, the maritime dispute was characterised by several months of contentious legal action by both Patrick Stevedores and the MUA. This saw applications and appeals from the Federal Commission through the Federal Court and finally to the Full Bench of the High Court. Legal bills were astronomical and, if there was a winner, it was not seen in increased jobs or business confidence.

Another protracted dispute continued from 1997 into 1998 at the Curragh coalmine. Hearings as to whether the AIRC could make an award to resolve the dispute continued throughout 1998. The dispute ran for almost two years. The cost to local communities, to workers and businesses is incalculable.

We still have the long-standing dispute at the Gordonstone coalmine. The union has maintained a picket line at the mine since October 1997 and a succession of hearings and appeals see this matter still not resolved and set down for the Federal Court for further hearings in April. Legal costs for the parties are huge, and the cost does not end there. We have all seen the reports of the damage that this dispute has inflicted on the people and the businesses of Emerald.

These disputes in major export industries have been resolved only after protracted and costly legal and industrial action, but the cost to Queensland businesses and local communities such as Emerald is even greater. The need to resort to costly legal action is a result of the Federal Government's legislation that disempowered the Federal commission to such an extent that disputes are ending up in the law courts. This has led to bitter and protracted disputes followed by expensive and drawn-out legal proceedings.

The long drawn-out waterfront dispute orchestrated under Reith's industrial legislation, and now the Gordonstone dispute, have a clear lesson for Queensland. We need a strong and effective industrial relations commission to keep negotiations going and to help the parties resolve the differences. Queensland will continue down this path and send a message to Peter Reith and the Federal Government to immediately reverse the flawed changes to the Federal industrial relations system that are damaging Queensland and Australia.

In reviewing Queensland's industrial relations legislation we used a tripartite approach and we listened to employer groups as well as unions and other interested parties. One of the points put strongly by all sides was the need to return to the tried and true methods of conciliation and arbitration. We need a strong, independent umpire who can promote conciliation and resolution of disputes and not the politics of division and conflict that Reith and the Federal Government practise.

The Queensland Government is presently considering the recommendations of the industrial relations task force which reviewed Queensland's industrial relations legislation. The task force was chaired by Professor Margaret Gardner, who asserts that a strong industrial relations commission can prevent the type of disputes that have occurred under Reith's failed experiment.

Whilst the Government will not be implementing the recommendations of the task force lock, stock and barrel, I can assure the House that this Government will be introducing legislation which supports a strong and effective Queensland Industrial Relations Commission which is able to settle disputes through mediation and conciliation. An independent and effective Industrial Relations Commission can stop protracted disputes—

Time expired.
