Speech by

Hon. P. BRADDY

MEMBER FOR KEDRON

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MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Industrial Relations

Hon. P. J. BRADDY (Kedron—ALP) (Minister for Employment, Training and Industrial Relations) (9.50 a.m.), by leave: Since coming to office, the Beattie Government has demonstrated its commitment to economic and social harmony by restoring balance and fairness to Queensland's industrial laws. Today I draw the attention of members to some of the features of the so-called Reith second wave amendments and to how they compare with the reasoned and balanced approach adopted by this Queensland Labor Government.

The Queensland Industrial Relations Act 1999 has created an industrial relations system that provides a clear and balanced arena for employers, employees and their representatives. The new laws reflect a balance between economic and social objectives because industrial relations are not just about economics and dollars. They are about how we live and how we work. They are about how we interact as a community.

A strong and relevant award system must be maintained if worker interests are to be protected. In regional and rural Queensland, more than half of the employees rely solely on State awards for setting their minimum rates of pay. In Queensland, with only 1.6% of small businesses subject to either collective or individual agreements, it is vital that awards be kept up to date, relevant and flexible to meet the needs of Queensland workplaces.

Both fair employers and fair employees are satisfied with the changes introduced by this Government to the Queensland award system. The Beattie Government, through the introduction of the Industrial Relations Act, has ensured the ongoing relevance of the award system by giving the Industrial Commission the power to make awards that set fair and reasonable wages and conditions reflecting contemporary community standards.

The Beattie Labor Government, unlike the coalition parties, believes that award conditions of employment such as allowances or leave entitlements should be set by the experts, not the politicians. They are matters not for Parliament but for the independent umpire, the Industrial Relations Commission. By contrast, Peter Reith and the Howard Government are intent on destroying the long-serving industrial relations system in Australia and its conventions.

Mr Reith is not content with stripping back matters in Federal awards to just 20 allowable matters. He now wants to restrict workers' entitlements to just 16. Under the Reith proposals, workers will no longer be entitled to the protection of matters under Federal awards such as long service leave, skill based career paths, accident make-up pay, protective clothing, payment or allowances for jury service, training and education leave, and tallies and bonuses.

The Reith proposal has caused widespread community alarm. Prominent Victorian church leaders this week condemned the second wave changes. These leaders believe that this so-called second wave of changes will only further promote workplace injustice at a time when the gap between the rich and the poor is widening. Their concerns are a damning indictment of the impact of Reith's workplace relations laws. In particular, they were moved to denounce the excessive shift to casual labour and the consequent effects on families, the constraints on collective bargaining and the eroding of the power of the workplace umpire, the Australian Industrial Relations Commission. All of these

effects, experienced through the Workplace Relations Act, will be worse if Reith's second wave eventuates.

The Reith Bill further demonstrates that this Federal coalition Government has neither heart nor soul. We need look no further than Reith's responses to the plight of the Oakdale miners with $6.3m in lost entitlements— entitlements that workers had every right to look forward to receiving.

Mr Borbidge: We're debating legislation next week.

Mr BRADDY: Just listen. Astonishingly, up until yesterday, when he was overturned by his own Federal Cabinet, Reith had continued to reject proposals to give the Oakdale miners their due entitlements from the Coal Industry Long Service Leave Fund. This is a backflip by the Federal Cabinet that came only after weeks of heartache and pain inflicted on the Oakdale miners. It came only after sustained pressure from the media and the Labor Opposition. It came only after the overwhelming weight of opinion of the Australian community to support a payout of the Oakdale miners' entitlements. It came only after a 24-hour strike by miners in Queensland and New South Wales—a strike that would have been averted if Reith or Howard had acted fairly at any time in the last few months.

In what also amounts to a drastic shift away from the Australian tradition of a fair deal for all, the amendments proposed by the Reith Bill will drastically cut the Australian Industrial Relations Commission's powers. The commission is to be renamed the Australian Workplace Relations Commission to satisfy Mr Reith's ideological bent. It will play no conciliation or arbitration role during industrial disputes or strikes, except where both parties have agreed to refer the matter to the commission, and only then at a cost of $500 per application. The new role of the commission will be to simply strip back awards to the 16 conditions of employment and rubber-stamp certified agreements subject to a reduced no disadvantage test.

The Reith Bill also seeks to introduce a concept of private mediation for industrial disputes, effectively dismantling the successful system of arbitration that has served Australia so well for so long. The independent umpire has been usurped and private guns for hire brought in to do justice Reith style. Parties in conflict will no longer be subject to mandatory appearances before the commission. Mediation will be doled out by a private provider only if both parties agree to appear before it. The interests of communities caught up in a dispute are not to be considered.

In contrast to the Reith blueprint, under Labor the Queensland industrial laws have restored the commission's stature as a forum to which employers and employees can turn for clear and relevant direction in the event of a dispute—an independent commission with power and responsibility. In Queensland, the commission is unrestricted in its ability to use its conciliation and arbitration powers if they relate to an industrial matter that affects employers and workers in the workplace. Importantly, the Queensland laws have also given the commission increased arbitration powers where bargaining has broken down or protracted disputation is occurring.

The Queensland commission is now required to consider the impact and effect of disputes and strikes on the economy, industry, the local community, an individual workplace, and employees themselves in the event of a protracted lockout. These changes were made in direct response to widespread calls for a strong commission in Queensland with the power to quickly intervene and resolve disputes. These calls came from employers, as well as unions and employees, as well as individual members of the community often adversely affected by industrial disputation.

I acknowledge that today many Queensland workers are voicing their concerns and protesting against Reith's anti-Australian changes. I assure this House that the Beattie Labor Government does not support Reith's anti-worker laws and I place on record our opposition to his harsh and destructive changes.