



Speech by

Hon. R. E. BORBIDGE

MEMBER FOR SURFERS PARADISE

Hansard 2 March 1999

GORDONSTONE MINE DISPUTE; MEMBER FOR FITZROY

Hon. R. E. BORBIDGE (Surfers Paradise—NPA) (Leader of the Opposition) (6 p.m.): I move—

"That this House, noting with concern the impact on jobs and business confidence of the Gordonstone dispute, calls on the Premier to—

dissociate himself and the Government from the continuing unlawful activities of certain of the picketers at the Gordonstone mine;

condemn the actions of CFMEU organised protesters who have prevented the peaceable passage of workers at the mine to and from their homes;

discipline the Member for Fitzroy over his public comments that he stands by his decision to break the law; and

calls for the immediate abandonment of the CFMEU picket line at Gordonstone and for all parties to the dispute to argue their case before the Federal Court when the matter is heard next month."

The mining industry generates more export dollars for this State than does any other. It is not only a major employer in its own right; it supports jobs in a great variety of sectors right across the State. In fact, it is such a central element of the State's economy that the multiplier effect is difficult to quantify. It is an industry that is now under enormous pressure, and that is particularly the case in respect of coal. What were very optimistic projections just a couple of years ago for demand in Asia for both coking and steaming product have taken a battering.

Of course, parallel with those market problems we have seen the emergence of very strong competitors with much lower costs, particularly in Africa and Indonesia. For example, coal contracts signed with Japan's leading users have seen reductions in prices of 18% for coking product and 13% for thermal coal. The only option our miners have is to increase their productivity to increase the competitiveness of their product. That is what this debate essentially is all about. It is about keeping mines open, workers employed and Australian industries competitive. That is why the Opposition views with such enormous concern the developments in Gordonstone and, indeed, the developments in the Parliament today.

The boardrooms of the world are watching the Queensland Government. What they saw today was not a pretty picture. What they saw today was an admission from this Government that "If you don't like the law, you break it"—an admission from this Government that it is okay to stop law-abiding Queenslanders going to work and back to their families. What we saw today was a total abrogation of responsibility to the wider electorate of Queensland and a total subservience to the trade union movement and in particular the CFMEU, to the point at which even the industrial relations legislation of this State will be changed to accommodate the whims of the union bosses and the tactics of the union thugs that we have seen at Gordonstone in recent times.

We know that Rio Tinto is a company that in terms of its work practices opts for work contracts. We know that Rio Tinto is the parent company of Queensland Coal at Gordonstone, and we know of its association with Pacific Coal. We also know that we have an enormous opportunity in this State that has been fostered by conservative and, up until today, Labor Governments, namely, the opportunity to deliver to Queensland ahead of Malaysia, probably to Gladstone, the biggest private sector infrastructure project in the history of Australia after the North West shelf.

We know that the Premier met Rio Tinto in London on the day following the performance of the member for Fitzroy at Gordonstone. I guess any real leader would have dissociated himself from law breakers—from people who break the law and seek to intimidate others. What did we hear in here today? We heard the Premier, the Attorney-General, the Minister for Education and the Minister for Mines and Energy say that it is okay to break the law. We heard the first law officer of the Crown—the first law officer of the State of Queensland—saying that he supports illegal action; that he supports people who take action to prevent law-abiding Queensland workers going about their lawful business to and from work.

The situation is very simple. In respect of the sacked Gordonstone workers—those that did have a job and left a couple of years back—the world has passed them by. Indeed, the realists and pragmatists in the trade union movement have passed them by. Many of those former workers are now back at Gordonstone. They are happy to be there; they want to work there and make a contribution to this State, their families and regional development. They are being prevented from doing so by the likes of the member for Fitzroy.

I believe what we have seen is a defining moment in the life of this can't do Government led by this can't do Premier. The only people he can do anything for are his trade union mates. The only people he can give a helping hand to are the CFMEU. The only people he is prepared to support have been the likes of the honourable member for Fitzroy. I would have thought that, in a society where we elect our Governments, where we take an oath of office as members and, when we go into Cabinet, as Ministers of the Crown to uphold the law, in a dispute such as Gordonstone the Premier and the Government would have been siding with the people who are abiding by the law.

Let us get one thing absolutely clear: this is not a debate about the right to dissent. No-one on this side of the House argues with anyone who wants to protest, march up and down with a few placards and put their particular point of view. However, this is about more than that. This is about the law of the land. This is about the laws that we pass in this place, and which we have a sovereign duty to defend until such time as they are changed, being honoured and respected by the Premier and by his Government. What we saw today was a shameful admission by the Minister for Justice and Attorney-General as the first law officer of this State that "If you don't like the law in Queensland, it's okay to disobey it". Presumably if someone does not like the speed limit and they are stopped by the police they can say, "The Attorney-General says it's all right. You can break the law in Queensland if you don't agree with it." If one breaks the law in Queensland, one is compared with Mahatma Gandhi or Nelson Mandela. One is a hero. These are the standards that the member for Brisbane Central has delivered to the public administration of the State of Queensland.

Tonight we should be thinking of the wider picture. We should be thinking of trying to secure the \$4 billion plus in major investment in Queensland through Rio Tinto. We should be thinking of the right to work whether one is a member of a union or not, under a contract if one wants to and under freedom of choice in this State and nation.

As a total capitulation to the trade union movement, we now see that the Minister for Industrial Relations is going to bring in industrial relations laws to end the conflict. Of course, you do not have a conflict if you give in. You do not have a conflict if you roll over. You do not have a conflict if you say to those picketers at the gate, "Stop the buses. Stop the workers going home to their wife and kids", when those families are being subjected to a reasonable degree of intimidation by union heavies.

So what we had was an opportunity for investment and jobs in Queensland but also for social justice. What has happened? This Premier and this Government have failed, and failed miserably. The tragedy is that this sends an absolutely horrendous message to the people whom we need to be investing in this State for the future of Queensland. As a result of the sectional narrow-mindedness of the Labor Government in this State, we have seen a recipe for a loss of jobs, projects, investment and confidence in Queensland as a place for business to come and to grow.
