



Speech by

Mr T. MALONE

MEMBER FOR MIRANI

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INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS BILL

Mr MALONE (Mirani—NPA) (11.30 a.m.): I rise today to join the growing chorus of discontent with the Beattie Government's Industrial Relations Bill 1999. The Bill is already dead in the water. It has been discredited in record time. I ask: why is it dead? Firstly, it is dead because of its dishonesty. The Premier talks about job creation, but this Bill will have the opposite effect, and I ask the House to mark my words in that respect. Secondly, it is dead because it has been universally canned by ever major commentator in Queensland outside the ranks of those who spin the union line or the Government line. Thirdly, it is dead because it has been rebuked by workers and employers alike. That is ironic because, supposedly, the Bill has been designed to assist those very people.

It says a lot when key fellow travellers within the Labor Party and the trade union movement are not only distancing themselves from the Bill but are also publicly criticising it. They even took aim at the Bill before it charted its way through Cabinet. One does not have to look very far to see why everyone from the employee groups and Bill Ludwig to large sections of the media are up in arms over this Bill. This is a reactionary Bill that threatens to turn back the clock to the bad old days. This Government, the Government that the Premier likes to promote as warm and cuddly, is being far too cuddly by half. It is in danger of smothering the private sector economy with this exercise in back to the 1950s pro-union legislation.

This is a bad Bill. It is a regressive Bill. We need to look forward and begin the long process of truly empowering people and giving them control over their lives. This Bill and its authors look backwards. The Bill abolishes greenfield industrial agreements, reopening the door to costly demarcation disputes such as we have seen before. It throws all awards open to review. It allows union officials to invade workplaces uninvited and at no notice. It has huge ramifications for the industry that I know well, the sugar industry, and has caused great concern amongst employers and farmers. I will talk about that later. It ends choice in the workplace through the reintroduction of that old Labor chestnut, compulsory unionism through stealth.

Freedom is an important commodity. The National Party prides itself on its belief in freedom—freedom of speech, freedom of movement, freedom of the press, freedom to join a union without coercion or compulsion and, also, the freedom not to join a union. It is a great pity that the Australian Labor Party does not believe in freedom. It is a shame that it subscribes to a view once expressed by that great democrat, Joseph Stalin, the Soviet dictator, who said that freedom was precious—so precious that it ought to be rationed. It seems that this is the Labor view of Queensland in 1999. That is the dinosaur view that the Queensland ALP and its Premier take in the final year of the second millennium. On the one hand, Labor and its parliamentary leaders say that they advocate individual liberty. On the other hand, they hold a gun to the workers' heads demanding that they belong to a union, and this legislation will enforce that.

I ask members in this House to cast their minds back to 26 November 1996. It was on this day that then Minister for Training and Industrial Relations, Santo Santoro, introduced the Workplace Relations Bill 1996. At that time the Bill constituted the best industrial relations package in all of Australia. It provided fairness and equality through measures like voluntary unionism, essential services legislation to protect our community and the establishment of the Employment Advocate. With the stroke of a pen, this good work is being undone.

Gone are the days of harmonious relations and negotiation. Welcome to a new era of industrial sabotage and confrontation. Workplace relations is an integral part of the social fabric of the community at large and the individuals who live within it. The National/Liberal coalition believes that employees and employers, not third parties, should have the central role in helping to shape industrial relations in their workplaces. The employee and employer can best develop working arrangements based on appreciation of their common interest in the prosperity of the enterprise in which they work. This Bill undermines the confidentiality of agreements that are freely entered into between the employer and employee. Unfortunately, that will be to the detriment of all. The new system undermines that partnership to the detriment of all Queenslanders. It seeks to pit employee against employer. It seeks to divide.

As I said earlier, this is a move back to the old legislation that existed so many years ago, which created havoc within our work force for many years. I am sure that all honourable members can remember those good old days.

Mr Purcell interjected.

Mr MALONE: We have a typical example in the interjector opposite.

Mr Purcell: I will stand up for workers every day of the week.

Mr MALONE: So will I. If this is the best that the Queensland Labor Party can do—and we see an example of it opposite—this Bill deserves to fail. If Queensland is to compete and thrive in the 21st century, we must take the necessary steps to meet the economic challenges of the future. This is not a Bill for the future; it is a document that has no future.

I also oppose the Bill because it will decimate Queensland's multimillion-dollar sugar industry, which is a major employer. With the onset of the crushing season, the attempt to stifle the industry makes this debate very timely. The sugar industry is the backbone of my electorate, which houses four sugar mills, a sugar refinery, a bulk sugar terminal, hundreds of sugarcane farmers and thousands of farmers and mill workers. Almost one-quarter of the sugar produced in Queensland is produced in the electorate of Mirani. I add for the information of members opposite that those are hardworking people. They certainly work too hard to breed dingos for profit or drive four and a half tonne trucks to town to claim diesel fuel rebates.

My electorate is the home of many thousands of people who rely on the sugar industry for their livelihoods. The members representing the electorates of Mulgrave, Hinchinbrook, Tablelands, Burdekin, Whitsunday, Keppel and Burnett would vouch for the fact that the sugar industry is a vital industry. Because it is a vital industry, sugar can ill afford to be king hit by this legislation. As we speak, world sugar prices are at their lowest level in 13 years. Global surplus sugar stocks will cause continuing downward pressures on sugar prices. Recently, the world sugar price dropped to US3.9c a pound. That was basically because of the huge amount of sugar going onto the market from Brazil. The Brazilian currency devalued and the industry in that country is now able to compete on the world market far better than we can.

Unfortunately, the sugar industry is in a world competitive market and works within constraints that are far beyond the scope of this House and the legislation that we are talking about today. Unfortunately, the industry will be shackled by this type of legislation. We need to be allowed to compete on the world market. To achieve that, as an industry we need to be able to organise ourselves freely.

The centralist policies of the Beattie Labor Government have also cut a swathe through the industry. The dam proposals for the Finch Hatton area and St Helens Creek have been axed. Fees and charges have skyrocketed. The new tree-clearing guidelines, which have been spoken about today—

Mr Purcell: What's this got to do with industrial relations?

Mr MALONE: This has a lot to do with it. These IR laws are the last straw.

At this point, I wish to summarise the key features of the legislation and scrutinise its impacts on the sugar industry. Clauses 372 and 373 of the Bill are particularly disturbing, as they provide for authorised industrial officers to enter and inspect premises and request information without notice. As honourable members would imagine, this has the potential to create major disruption in the workplace. The Labor Party obviously believes that a worker and his or her employer have absolutely no right to conduct their business without unwarranted interference from third parties.

For example, this raises workplace health and safety concerns in relation to harvesting. Members opposite may or may not know that during harvest time heavy machinery travels over haul roads and the operators are in constant contact via two-way radio. The last thing they need is people entering their workplace without telling them they are there. That would create huge concerns for those contractors in terms of potential liabilities. Many years ago, I saw an example of that when a union employee had an accident at a workplace. The legislation being debated today will increase the potential for such accidents to occur.

Imagine the workplace health and safety obligations that an employer would have to fulfil in terms of unionists who drop by unexpectedly and uninvited. Imagine the consequences if regressive legislation such as this had been in place during the Gordonstone mine picket. That is a Federal dispute, but it illustrates the perils that we face from out of control and badly run unions. The Labor Party fails to realise that under the current legislation industrial inspectors have the right to investigate when there is a problem with pay or conditions. They do spot checks now. However, under the Labor proposal individuals will be able to intrude into workplaces that have no union membership. The police do not even have this power.

Clause 113, which pertains to union preference clauses, is equally disturbing. It seems that the ALP cannot come to terms with the fact that compulsory unionism has been discarded into the dustbin of history. The steady decline of unions—to the absolute horror of Labor Party socialists—reflects the reality that people in this free society like to make their own independent choices. By drafting this Bill, the Labor Party is making a last grasp at trying to keep alive the outdated notion of unionism, which passed its heyday almost a generation ago.

Honourable members do not have to take my word for this; they should read the headlines. In September 1995 an article appeared in the Courier-Mail headed "Super unions blamed for membership drop". On 1 December 1998, an article in the Daily Mercury was headed "Unions confront declining membership". An article in the Australian Financial Review was headed "Exodus fuels union cynicism". One article states that "union membership has been dropping rapidly since 1976". It goes on to state that "workers have deserted unions to the point that under one-third of the workforce is now unionised".

The Bill also removes the unfair dismissal exemptions for businesses with fewer than 15 employees. This miscalculation will further put at risk the Government's promise to achieve a State unemployment rate of 5%. The return of Labor's job destroying unfair dismissal laws will act as a further disincentive to business to hire more employees. It will suffocate small business, which is the main engine for job growth. This Government is ignorant of the fact that Governments do not create productive, wealth creating jobs; business does. In common with other Governments, this Government's job is to cooperate with business to generate more jobs. This Government has not even started. This appalling Bill proves that it has no intention of ever starting.

We have already established that this Bill is dead. When Queensland now has the lowest level of industrial dispute since 1913, one is entitled to ask the question: "Why fix something that is clearly not broken?" Recently, local Mackay radio talkback host John Henry posed the question—

"So do you think they're buttering up people that financially support the party over their history?"

The answer has to be: "You betcha!"

It all comes back to the grubby little nexus between the unions and the ALP. Irrespective of whatever members opposite say about the Nationals and the Liberals and business, farmers and graziers, we do not let those groups set the agenda or even blackmail our parties. However, Bill Ludwig's AWU and other affiliated unions do have a vote in the ALP. They have a say about policy, who will become a candidate and who will become a leader.

This so-called IR showpiece was supposed to be a traditional Labor Bill. Funnily enough, Laborites have been the most scathing in their criticisms. In an article in the Courier-Mail from 29 May 1999, former Goss Government staffer Dennis Atkins stated that this Bill is about "settling the odd personal score". He predicted also that the passing of this Bill would be the beginning of the end of the Premier. This prophecy is not only a reference to Labor's complex faction system but also to community response. Queenslanders will rue the day that Labor unleashes this legislation on small businessmen and women of Queensland. They will remember that on Black Tuesday, 25 May 1999—similar to Frankenstein's monster—"Braddy's Horror" was born.

In conclusion, I wish to quote from a letter sent to me by the Fundamental Rights Enterprise Ecology Association of Mackay, which is headed by Mick Hodge. I know that the member for Mackay also has a copy of this letter. It states—

"In the last few years we have seen the strangle hold our unions had on our industries and life styles brought back to a reasonable level. The Industrial Relations Bill being put forward will give unions the power to drag us back into the industrial turmoil of the 70s and 80s.

Most Queensland small businesses have the capacity to increase their staff but the State Government is considering laws that can take away any confidence business may have to employ.

If Government was serious about its policy to create jobs it would be trying to make a better environment for business to employ people.

The Premier promised he would create more jobs for Queensland. Government must realise that they don't create sustainable jobs, business does. Our Government must start to cooperate with the business sector for Queensland to have more jobs.

Today on behalf of the workers of Queensland, we are asking the Government to reject this bill. Businesses can survive by down scaling and consolidating, but workers cannot survive without a job.

It is inconceivable to any sound minded person that the government could introduce such draconian legislation without discouraging the employers to increase their work force."

The letter is signed by Mick Hodge. I strenuously oppose the Bill.
