



Speech by

**SHAUN NELSON**

**MEMBER FOR TABLELANDS**

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Hansard 14 November 2000

**WORKCOVER QUEENSLAND AND OTHER ACTS AMENDMENT BILL**

**Mr NELSON** (Tablelands—IND) (5.02 p.m.): My contribution is along the same lines as that of the member for Toowoomba North. My electorate is experiencing the same sorts of problems as those alluded to by him. The people who own these companies or these businesses are not multimillionaires. They cannot afford large WorkCover premiums, but they need to employ people to maintain a cash flow through their business.

WorkCover premiums are a necessary part of the working environment. I support WorkCover and I support the idea that there needs to be a safety net for people who work in industry in case they are injured. I hope that the amendments being put forward today will overcome the difficulties that I foresee. Although they are very few in number, there are people who make fraudulent WorkCover claims. They are people who get a job and within a short period lodge a claim with WorkCover. For example, a timber mill in my electorate employed a guy and within a few days of commencing that job he complained of back pain. Subsequently he lodged a WorkCover claim, and it has been revealed recently that this guy has a history of getting himself employed and then making fraudulent claims against his employers. I hope that these amendments will cover those sorts of situations. These are the sorts of things that make it very hard for small businesses to operate.

Despite the ideological arguments behind this Bill—and we had a bit of to and fro between the member for Clayfield and members on the other side of the House—we do not live in the Dark Ages when the people who owned the coalmines sent 13-year-old children to work and made a huge living off their backs. In some cases, the amount of money being paid to people in salaries by businesses such as sawmills is crippling.

In Australia we have a very good and a very high standard of living, which is something that I think is to be applauded. But at what cost? I state at the outset that I worked as a security guard and I worked for a minimum wage for quite some time. I understand what it is like to be in that situation. However, I also understand the flip side of the argument, that is, a company that is paying out a huge amount of money for what is basically unskilled labour has very high costs, which make its product too expensive for the consumer. This leads to the high unemployment levels that we have in this country, which is considered to be a relatively well-to-do nation. The social security system in Australia means that the taxpayer then has to bear a higher burden. It is a vicious cycle.

Many people will scream blue murder at this suggestion, but it has always been my belief that if we lowered the minimum wage there would be a much higher opportunity for employment because businesses would be able to employ more staff. I suppose a few people will disagree with that. Nevertheless, as I said, I have worked for a minimum wage, and that has always been my view. I have a brother who is currently working in an unskilled field for a minimum wage. When we make a comparison, we find that Australians are paid much more than their American counterparts in unskilled jobs. Recently some friends of mine from the United States were visiting me. They were absolutely amazed at the amount of money that we get paid for unskilled work.

As I said, there is a balance to be struck as to which way we want to go; whether we want to have a higher level of employment—more people getting the chance to work—or high unemployment and the people who are working being paid more. I simply point out that small businesspeople are not

the devil. They are not evil; they are not bad. They are seeking to employ people. They should not be slugged massive amounts of money for doing so; it is anti-business. The cost to the small businessperson of paying insurance premiums can be crippling, as it was in the case of the employer in my electorate whose WorkCover premiums have increased because of that fraudulent WorkCover claim. The sawmill owner in the electorate of the member for Toowoomba North is in the same position; he will be debating whether or not he should lay off the other six workers in his sawmill because he cannot afford to continue.

These are matters that need to be addressed. I will support the amendments because, having read through them, it is my belief that they will go to the heart of the matter and address these issues.

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