



Speech by

Mr JIM PEARCE

MEMBER FOR FITZROY

Hansard 4 & 5 April 2001

ADDRESS IN REPLY

Mr PEARCE (Fitzroy—ALP) (5.49 p.m.): On rising to take part in this Address in Reply debate, firstly I congratulate all the new members of parliament on their success on 17 February. In particular, I congratulate the new Labor members who face the huge responsibility of representing the people of their respective electorates.

I have read some of the maiden speeches that were made yesterday and listened to those made today, and I have to say that all members have made outstanding contributions. They have been speeches of passion and commitment. The people have chosen well. I can see that they will all be effective members of parliament. They will make the Beattie Labor government a very powerful, long-term government in Queensland. Well done to you all!

An honourable member interjected.

Mr PEARCE: Definitely. I am a big contender, actually, for the backbench. Being a member of parliament is not an easy task and it is not an easy way of life. There will be plenty of good times, there will be plenty of bad times and there will be plenty of times of disappointment. There will be times when electorate commitments will interfere with personal plans and members' normal way of life, but being a member of parliament is an honour. Members are a part of the history of this great state, so they should enjoy it while they are here.

I see a lot of talent on the Labor side of the House. We have a great Premier, a disciplined, hardworking cabinet, and a young, energetic backbench—

Mr Briskey interjected.

Mr PEARCE:—even Darryl Briskey—from which we could select another two cabinets. There is enough talent in the government to form another two cabinets, which would govern in the same way as our current cabinet does. I wish all members well. I advise them to work hard in their electorates. I will share something that I have learnt in my time: respect the electorate, respect the people, be caring, be genuine and be sincere in your dealings, and members will always be respected for the job that they are doing.

This is my fifth term in the parliament, having won the seat of Broomsound in 1989. I went to the most recent election under new boundaries. I tell those who represent small electorates that my electorate now covers 44,000 square kilometres.

Mr Seeney: It's good country, too.

Mr PEARCE: It is great country. I actually took over some of the area of the member for Callide, and it is going very well now, they tell me. As I said, Fitzroy now encompasses some 44,000 square kilometres and it takes in areas that were once a part of the Callide electorate. In the run-up to the election, I was uncertain how the people of the new rural area would vote. I had been working the area for six to seven months and was able to show the new voters of the Fitzroy electorate that, as a politician, I had a different style. I did not say anything about the former member or the member before him, but—

Mr Seeney: I gave you a good reference.

Mr PEARCE: I know. I have a different style. I believe in meeting people in their own backyards, which is why I hold regular meetings in some 20 communities. I believe that members of parliament have to be out there talking to people face to face.

I bring to the attention of the House—because I am quite proud of it, actually—the fact that in the new areas of Fitzroy, where the Labor Party had received low results in previous elections, we improved quite dramatically with swings varying from 7 per cent to 32 per cent. For example, Baralaba had a swing of 17.8 per cent; Goovigen, 22.7 per cent; Moura, 20.85 per cent; Parkhurst—an area that I picked up from Mr Lester—27 per cent; and The Caves, 32 per cent. I am very proud of that. It was a good result for me. I thank the voters of the Fitzroy electorate for their vote of confidence. I know that Darryl Briskey did his bit out there, passing the message on about the work that we do down here. I thank him for that.

I thank the CFMEU and other unions across the electorate for their loyal support. I cannot thank them enough. They know that I am a strong union man with a strong union background and that I am loyal to the unions, and they have shown their loyalty to me. Labor members know that we cannot thank the unions enough for the hard work that they do to get people like me elected.

I thank my electorate officer, Sara Barnbaun, who has worked with me for the full time that I have been a member, and our backup staff, Sharon and Trudy. I thank them for the great job that they do. Sara is an outstanding electorate officer. She is well respected across government departments for the way that she does her job.

I thank my wife, Diane, who understands and supports my commitment to the electorate. I am very unfortunate to have three sons, Jamie, Michael and Shane, who are decent and respectable young men who cause no worries to their mum and dad. I now have a daughter-in-law, Shane's wife, who is a gem. She has a social conscience like me, so she's right in as far as I am concerned.

There are many issues that affect the Fitzroy electorate that I could spend hours talking about. The 20 minutes that is allotted does not allow me to cover all of them. However, I would like to turn to the issue that I am most passionate about, which is jobs and job security. If we talk about tackling unemployment head on, we must be prepared to make tough decisions. Everything we do in this place must be focused on getting Queenslanders jobs. Unemployment hurts everyone: those without jobs, their families, and businesses that rely on customers who have money and the confidence to spend it. That is what we are lacking in the country at the moment.

I am very aware of the Premier's commitment to job creation and the efforts of cabinet ministers in searching for and implementing job creation initiatives. I am a proud member of a Labor government that is strongly focused on jobs, jobs and more jobs. Hundreds of thousands of Queenslanders now have jobs as a result of the policies and commitments of Labor governments. The unemployed have gained skills through job training programs and many have moved on to find full-time employment.

The Labor Party in this state was born out of the aspirations of ordinary Queenslanders seeking employment security and job opportunities. Those core principles have remained strong in the thinking of Labor Party members over the past 100 years and they are still strong today. We also believe that in government we can make a difference. As a party we believe that the strategic intervention of government in the economic process can ensure that we move along the path of economic progress without leaving the people behind.

Our government's strategy is committed to delivering seven key policy areas: more jobs for Queensland; building Queensland's regions; skilling Queensland, the Smart State; safer and more supportive communities; better quality of life; valuing the environment; and strong government leadership, which we certainly have. Under the leadership of Premier Peter Beattie, Queensland is heading in the right direction. The Premier is working hard and cabinet is focused on achieving outcomes that improve the quality of life and standard of living of all Queenslanders, whether they reside in the cities or rural areas.

The government is positive and active, but when it comes to multinationals like BHP there is a much more negative approach. BHP is anti-worker, anti-family and anti-community. It is prepared to use any tactic to erode the quality of life and standard of living for Queenslanders. In the interests of Queensland, and in particular central Queensland, I wish to again put on record the aggressive and greedy behaviour of BHP, which by its actions clearly demonstrates its lack of commitment to the long-term welfare of this state.

Just recently, BHP closed two mines—and there was a lot in the media about it—Laelham and Kenmare. By closing those two mines, it froze the use of millions of tonnes of coal. Over 200 jobs were lost. A major economic impact will be felt in Blackwater and there will be other consequences to the central Queensland region. BHP has shut down two mines and walked away from them, leaving behind recoverable coal. That cannot be and is not in the best interests of this state.

We only need to look at what BHP is doing in the marketplace to see how committed it is to getting the best result for Queensland. BHP has a strategy to deliberately force down coal prices. This was publicly stated by Rick Gazzard, the general manager of BHP in Queensland. In making that statement, BHP said to the people of Queensland, 'We are deliberately underselling our resources.' That is a calculated strategy to force the Canadians and smaller Australian producers out of the race as market suppliers. While this strategy has been running its course, we have had to suffer massive job losses for permanent employees. We have seen the demise of coalmining communities, with major impacts on small business, health services and schools.

Mr PEARCE (Fitzroy—ALP) (11.30 a.m.), continuing: Before the adjournment of the Address in Reply last evening, I was telling the House about BHP's strategy to undersell the state's coal reserves and the impact of low coal prices on jobs and communities across central Queensland. A reality of life is that coal industry job losses have a flow-on impact across the region, hitting hard places like Rockhampton and Mackay through reduced cash flows, which in turn mean less job opportunities for the residents of those cities. Through its silence, the public of Queensland has allowed BHP and other multinationals to move toward a casualised work force and to blatantly attack workers' rights, wages and conditions. That is to the detriment of our children's future.

A lot of what I speak about falls under the jurisdiction of the federal government, because coal industry awards are federal awards. However, that does not mean that we as Queenslanders should sit back quietly and allow our fellow Queenslanders to be put on the unemployment scrap heap by multinationals driven by returns for shareholders. BHP has publicly admitted that its core business is coal production. It is not in the business of caring about families or communities. How can that be in the best interests of Queensland?

We, as a people, embrace the 12-hour shifts despite the impact on the long-term health of workers, the impact on family relationships and the reduction in job opportunities. We allow mining companies to walk away from recoverable coal reserves and we support them in accessing the easy, low-cost coal reserves of Queensland. We allow it because we do not make an issue out of it, and governments are not forced by public opinion to act. We give a nod of approval when mining companies find a reason to shut down mining operations because the reserves are more costly to recover and more likely to impact on their bottom line.

There is no determination by governments to get the balance right so as to ensure the long-term sustainability of efficient coal production in Queensland. When the cheap coal is gone—and we have to face up to this in this state today—the BHPs, Rio Tintos and Anglo-Americans of this world will relocate to other countries, leaving the smaller companies to extract the more difficult-to-access coal reserves. Mining companies are not accountable to anyone; they must become accountable to this state and to this nation.

The coal reserves of Queensland belong to the people of Queensland. Governments must ensure that the returns to the people are maximised through fair taxing regimes, security of employment and the stability of towns and regions. The people of Queensland need also to take more seriously the bad-faith behaviour of multinationals. We must realise that the current situation exists because John Howard and his government are in bed with the multinationals. As a people, we are party to a culture of not caring about an issue of national importance until it impacts on us personally. That is a sad situation. We have to start caring more about what is happening around us, and what is happening to our state and our country. What is happening sets the stage for the further undermining of the quality of life for Queenslanders by employers who no longer respect their employees as men and women. To them, they are nothing but names on a computer that can be erased at any time, and they are doing that almost on a daily basis. That is why it is important for mining companies to destroy the collective bargaining power of unions.

What coal companies want is a casualised work force on individual contracts. We all know that once an individual signs up, his or her only avenue to future wage increases is through one-on-one negotiations with the company and that future employment is based on performance and personal effectiveness as measured by the company. If BHP effectively moves the rights of its employees to collectively bargain by incorporating strict confidentiality clauses into individual contracts, and if an individual has problems with the boss over wages, working conditions or workplace safety, by the nature of the contracts the union is rendered powerless to assist. Once this is achieved, the balance of power swings irreversibly back to management. No longer is it management versus union; it becomes management versus the individual. We do not have to have a great imagination to see what would result if an individual under a contract fell out of favour with management. Quite simply, he or she would not have a job for too long.

By allowing this culture to develop and become entrenched, we must accept responsibility for our failure, for thinking only of ourselves. Because of our lack of interest in the long-term impacts of

today's failures, we are responsible for the problems that future generations will be forced to deal with. The federal government must act now to stem the flow of job security and job losses in the coal industry. Support for One Nation and other groups has risen because governments have stood idly by and accepted the globalisation of the world's economy as justification for the insecurity of jobs and local industry. The social and economic costs to the community will be enormous if we allow people's skills and talents to be wasted, to be simply thrown out the gate.

As a government, we must remain committed to improving the efficiency and effectiveness of our industry, but we must do this in a way that does not diminish the public benefits of secure employment. Concern about security of employment is becoming more widespread throughout the community and we need to listen. People know that real jobs are not being created.

We all know people who have either faced unexpected redundancy or had the long-term security of their jobs taken away. Many of them are still raising families and educating their children. We have to start caring about that. Many of those people will never recover financially from the sudden loss of their main source of employment. We have to care about that. We have to start acting to show people that we do care.

In central Queensland, we know the impact of job losses. The sudden closure of mines and subsequent sackings can be devastating for families, towns and regional cities. As an elected member in this place, I acknowledge that government cannot interfere with the business and commercial imperatives under which it operates, but at the same time we as a government should not stand aside and watch the decimation of local and regional communities.

Everyone is aware of the real meaning of words such as 'restructuring', 'downsizing', 'outsourcing' and 'reorganisation'. They mean that in the long term loyal and stable workers can suddenly find themselves without a job. There is no justice in sudden restructuring or mass sackings. I find it absolutely obscene that BHP's Paul Anderson can be paid a \$7.5 million salary and a bonus worth a reported \$100 million for getting the price of shares over the \$20 mark. This bloke is being rewarded for the scalps of workers made redundant by henchmen like Rick Gazzard, the Queensland manager of BHP Coal. The loss of jobs has a social and economic cost to the community locally and in the regions through the wastage of people's skills and their working potential. We need to act now in the interests of future generations.

This is an issue that is important not only to me as the member for Fitzroy but also to my region and to Queensland. The people of Queensland and the people of this nation have to wake up and start saying to the multinationals like BHP, 'Enough is enough.'
