



Speech by

Hon. GORDON NUTTALL

MEMBER FOR SANDGATE

Hansard 30 July 2002

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Enterprise Bargaining

Hon. G. R. NUTTALL (Sandgate—ALP) (Minister for Industrial Relations) (10.04 a.m.), by leave: Under the system of enterprise bargaining, the government is currently faced with a combined wages claim from public sector unions of \$2.83 billion. These claims cover nurses, health workers, ambulance officers, police, building and maintenance workers and employees of Main Roads. They include wage claims of between six and nine per cent per annum when wage rises nationally are in the order of 3.1 per cent per annum, as well as substantial increases in agency resources such as staffing levels.

As honourable members of this House would be aware, negotiations have been ongoing between the government and the Queensland Nurses Union for some time. After extensive mediation and formal conciliation talks before the Australian Industrial Relations Commission, regrettably, agreement was unable to be reached and the commission has now terminated the bargaining period and referred the matters for arbitration. This industrial dispute with our nurses has been unfortunate. However, disputes of this nature are a by-product, in particular, of the federal system of bargaining, with its limited powers for the federal commission to put an end to damaging or protracted industrial disputation. This, along with all other forms of enterprise bargaining, has encouraged and contributed to a combat culture within the public sector, with unions mounting high-profile campaigns every two to three years.

I am, however, pleased to indicate that negotiations with other public sector unions in Queensland are progressing in a more positive frame. Last week, the government and health workers unions voluntarily participated in mediation talks before the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission. As a result, unions are this week consulting further with their members. While we are at a sensitive stage in the negotiations, the government remains confident that we are close to a settlement. Just yesterday, the government also approved a number of new offers covering wages and conditions for other groups of public sector workers. We are also hopeful these will be received positively by unions and their members.

I can also report that the government has recently announced a review into the future of bargaining in the Queensland public sector. The honourable Bob Hawke has been appointed as the independent reviewer. Mr Hawke has a long standing in industrial relations and government and his ability to achieve consensus was a strong factor in his selection. The review, to be completed by 30 September 2002, will examine a number of models, including the current bargaining system; an annual economic wages adjustment, with access to the Queensland Industrial Relations commission for work value or special case applications; an awards-arbitration model; public service arbitrators; and any other models that may also be identified throughout the review.

I have held a number of meetings with public sector unions in relation to this review. After an initial rebuff, I am pleased to indicate that unions are responding more positively to this review. Unions have pointed towards a number of issues, such as the potential for a dual private-public sector system, which they wish to place on record and to which the government is sensitive. I am confident that we will be able to work through our issues and establish a system that is more conducive to government, to public sector unions, to workers and to the Queensland community at large.