



Speech by

Hon. J. FOURAS

MEMBER FOR ASHGROVE

Hansard 27 November 2002

INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS AMENDMENT BILL

Hon. J. FOURAS (Ashgrove—ALP) (5.15 p.m.): I am pleased to rise to support the Industrial Relations Amendment Bill. The amendments being debated today will definitely strengthen and clarify the administrative functions within the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission, principally by consolidating the role of the commission vice-president while leaving the role of the president unchanged. The amendments will provide to the commission more authority and greater flexibility to better meet its responsibility to resolve emerging matters of dispute.

The changes that are contained within this legislation follow on from the recommendations of the *Hawke report of a review of enterprise bargaining in the Queensland public sector*. This report recommended that the government consider establishing a specialist public sector panel in the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission to hear and determine public sector industrial matters. In considering the Hawke report recommendations, the government has decided to enhance the operations of the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission by requiring the vice-president to assign an industry or group of industries to a panel of members. Importantly, this may include one or more public sector panels.

Mr Hawke also recommended that the government implement a modified and structured bargaining system for departments and agencies with defined time lines for the negotiation, consideration and arbitration of agreement and that the government begin negotiations with public sector unions on the development of a code of good faith negotiations. The government has been working productively with public sector unions to implement the government's response to this recommendation to further structure the bargaining process and develop a code of good faith negotiations. The discussions with the unions have centred around the development of a protocol of good faith bargaining for the Queensland public sector.

The protocol will establish the broad rules under which agreements are negotiated, including triggers for accessing conciliation and/or arbitration by the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission. It is a vital step forward in fostering an environment in which all parties in future can openly negotiate fair and reasonable outcomes that benefit not just employees but also all Queenslanders. I am advised that negotiations are continuing with public sector unions to finalise the protocol document. As a former executive member of a public sector union, I do realise the dual responsibility of those union officials to actually look after the interests of their members while at the same time behaving in a way that is agreeable and acceptable.

The Hawke report also recommended that the government establish formal and regular consultative mechanisms with public sector unions to maintain regular discussions regarding broad industrial issues affecting the Queensland public sector. I think that is a very important aspect of this process, because if people can sit around a table over a long period of time and have meaningful discussions, that must aid the process of understanding and ultimately achieve outcomes that are mutually beneficial. The government supports this recommendation wholeheartedly and has agreed with the public sector unions to meet on a regular basis at both the departmental level and at the central government level. This can only be good for Queensland, for the economy and for the government and its employees.

Consultation and discussion are at the heart of the government's commitment to helping Queensland workers and employers build a strong, prosperous economy—one that operates under the fairest industrial relations law. There is no doubt at all that the industrial relations process we have here is the envy of other states. That was brought home to me as I travelled to other states with the minister as a member of his committee. There can be no doubt whatsoever that the proposed changes will ensure an improved Queensland Industrial Relations Commission by enhancing the management and effectiveness of the commission. The independent umpire will be even stronger.

Governments of members opposite are noted for not accepting the need for an independent umpire. That is the basis for an unfair outcome. We need to support an independent umpire. This legislation makes that an even stronger proposition. The Beattie government is confident that the new legislation is the right approach and will deliver positive outcomes for all participants in the Queensland industrial relations community. Taken as a whole, it provides a clear and principled management structure for a strong and independent Queensland Industrial Relations Commission that will assist industrial parties to deliver fair outcomes for employers and employees while supporting the continued growth of this great state. I congratulate the minister on his response to the Hawke report and I commend the bill to the House.