



Speech by

Mr JIM PEARCE

MEMBER FOR FITZROY

Hansard 7 November 2002

MINERAL RESOURCES AMENDMENT BILL

Mr PEARCE (Fitzroy—ALP) (3.12 p.m.): Like the minister, I appreciate the importance of the mining industry to Queensland's economy, to our culture and to our identity. The first amendment of the bill aimed at lowering the penalties imposed for the late payment of rents in mineral development leases and mining leases granted under the Mineral Resources Act 1989 is all about a fair go. The Mineral Resources Act 1989 was passed at a time of very high interest rates, and I am sure that all members can remember those days. It was during the late 1980s, and high inflation and skyrocketing interest rates were a feature of that decade. These things are not a prominent feature of the Queensland financial landscape in the early years of the 21st century.

By continuing to discriminate between mineral development licences and their mining lease counterparts, we would be making a conscious choice to make mineral development a less attractive prospect, to drive out mineral development operators in temporary difficulties, and to sign off on a very rocky playing field in the mining industry. We do not want to be any part of that as a government. Penalties on late rent payments for mineral development leaseholders do not generate a significant amount of revenue for the government anyway. Even if they did, the clear inequities between mineral development and other mining leases would still make the amendment the right choice. These have been hard years for miners. In an increasingly competitive global business environment, miners facing genuine temporary difficulties will find significant relief in a cut of 10 per cent in late payment penalties, giving them a little more breathing space to find their feet. There are plenty of companies which will appreciate that assistance. Queensland is Australia's most decentralised state and the mining industry is of enormous significance to our economy. The mineral development sector in particular has suffered from the global economic environment of late. While the indications of an upturn are encouraging, it is vitally important that we both support existing operators and remain a fair and attractive prospect to future investors.

While talking about the mining industry, I take this opportunity to raise the issue of stress in the coal and metalliferous industry. The need to recognise the dangers of stress is now more important than ever because of the obligations of duty of care for employers and employees. As all members in this place are well aware, stress is part of our everyday lives. I have heard it said that stress can be a healthy motivating force. I am not sure how one would apply that assertion. One thing is for sure: stress can have a significant impact on our health and our work performance. Some people under stress may become dysfunctional for varying periods of time and place themselves and others at risk—a risk, in many cases, of serious injury or even death. From research and life experiences it is clear to me that stress can vary according to each individual and affects people in a variety of ways. I saw this when I was serving in Vietnam. I saw it in the mining industry, and I see it in my capacity as a local member.

Stress may be physical, emotional, cognitive, behavioural or a combination of all of these things. I have seen people affected by stress lose concentration, show poor judgment and respond slowly to workplace demands. In an environment like the mining industry, the situation of a stressed worker failing to respond, or not being with it or reacting too slowly is a disaster waiting to happen. Stress is not necessarily a result of the workplace environment where hours of work, workplace demands, workplace bullying and job uncertainty can put individuals under severe stress; stress can

also be taken on site. It can actually go to work with a person because of their personal and quality of life issues at home. They take them to work and it impacts on the work environment. This is an issue that I want to see taken seriously by the industry, management and miners, who need to be able to recognise the stress symptoms of their work colleagues.

I am not an expert in this area, but I am of the view that employers and employees need to be more proactive in identifying stress and helping those affected by it. A frontline defence strategy for dealing with stress needs to be put in place, but it must be effective and genuinely committed to working with those who need help, particularly those who are prepared to step forward and say, 'I need help.' That is one of the greatest tests of anyone's character—that is, being prepared to say, 'Look, I'm in a little bit of trouble here. I need help.' When they do that, they need to know that they will have the support of their employer and their workmates. I am sure that employees recognise and understand that stress can be a contributing factor in incidents resulting in serious injury or death, but I do not see much evidence coming from the mining industry itself that suggests credible stress management strategies are in place and, most importantly, that workers are encouraged to take advantage of the help available without fear of being targeted by employers for removal from the workplace because they are a risk.

At the moment in the coal industry when a person becomes ill or is injured they are all of a sudden continually looked at by the employer because the employer sees them as a risk, and that sort of attitude has to stop. Stressed individuals can be successfully facilitated to recovery. Employers and employees can be spared the trauma of fatalities, serious injuries and near misses. I encourage mining companies and the unions to facilitate and promote a stress management strategy for the coal industry work force. I believe that other major employers—the Stanwell Power Station, the magnesite mine at Kunwarara; those places where we have huge work forces and a lot of people working together—should be looking at putting in place stress management strategies.

As the representative of a coalmining electorate I know that there are always issues I can raise in this place, in particular workplace health and safety issues. I think every member realises that I am very passionate about them. They are close to my heart because I have been in the industry and I know the way the industry works. I know the ability of some to get around their responsibilities in relation to safety and the lengths to which some will go to cover their backsides when something goes wrong. It is all right to get out there and push the worker to do the job, but when something goes wrong the managers may want to walk away. Duty of care legislation helps us to control that to some extent, but it is still happening. I know about the poor management practices and the cause of multimillion dollar losses at mine sites. I believe change is happening at the moment, but I would like to see that change be more positive.

As a former mine worker I am also aware of the positive things that come from our mining industry, such as jobs, infrastructure and revenue to the state to improve quality of life for all Queenslanders. We all benefit from the revenue raised through the mining industry. In Queensland we have an efficient industry admired by other nations, one that we as Queenslanders can take much pride in. Unfortunately, there is always a need for someone such as me to continue to focus on mining industry workplace health and safety issues. So long as I am a member of this place I will continue to do that.

Before I finish I would like to inform the House of the recent performance of Blackwater's mines rescue team, which was invited to compete in Canada after it won the 2001 Australian underground mines rescue competition at Baalbank colliery in the eastern district of New South Wales. I believe that the minister made a contribution to help get the mines rescue team to Canada, as did the Minister for Emergency Services. The mining company itself got right behind the team and supported it. I commend the Blackwater mine for its effort in supporting the mines rescue team. The local community also put in a lot of money to help these boys go to Canada, where they performed very well.

The world competition in Canada was held at Timmins, Ontario. It was held over a couple of days. Our team finished sixth out of 14. I believe that is an excellent performance. We have to take into consideration the foreign environment in which the competition was held. The performance of the BMA Blackwater team showed just how skilled our mines rescue teams are. In fact, one of the Canadian teams, Falconbridge, which became the world champions, was so impressed with our team that it paid a return visit to Queensland to participate in the Healy Cup held at Oakey Creek mine in September. The Falconbridge team's performance was also of a high standard. The team learnt a lot from the experience. I know one thing for sure: they certainly enjoyed the Aussie coalminer hospitality.

It was with some pride that I learnt from members of the visiting team—what I am about to say can be supported by people who were in attendance at the presentation dinner for the Healy Cup—that the captain of the Falconbridge team rated Queensland's mines rescue services superior to those of Canada. He was talking about the quality of our service in Australia in comparison with Canada. He said that the skills and team procedures of our mines rescue teams are of a very high standard. He was also

impressed with the amount of equipment we have and the technology that is available to assist our mines rescue teams in doing their work.

The team captain actually said, 'You Australians could show us a thing or two when it comes to mines rescue.' I thought that was a pretty important compliment for the services we provide here. It is a good rap for the service which highlights the importance of an ongoing commitment to the level and standard of mines rescue services in Queensland. One has to know these guys—to be with them and be part of their life—to realise how much they put into their jobs. The training is all voluntary. They are supported by their families and are strongly supported by the people in the mines in which they work.

It is disappointing to hear that the board of management is still talking about downsizing the Blackwater mines rescue station. I do not intend to revisit that issue during this debate except to say that such a move would certainly attract a lot of attention from the underground work force who, like myself, strongly oppose any move to downgrade or close the Blackwater mines rescue station. I know that the minister has taken an interest in this issue in the past. I feel very comfortable with the way I have been able to work with the minister in recent times on issues in the industry. I know that he is committed to the industry. It is not an easy industry to look after because of the need to work with the mining companies themselves as well as be aware of and sensitive and alert to those issues that affect the mining industry work force. I commend the bill to the House.
