



Speech by

Liz Cunningham

MEMBER FOR GLADSTONE

Hansard Tuesday, 9 November 2004

WORKERS' COMPENSATION AND REHABILITATION AND OTHER ACTS AMENDMENT BILL

Mrs LIZ CUNNINGHAM (Gladstone—Ind) (9.22 p.m.): In rising to speak to the Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation and Other Acts Amendment Bill, I would like to speak specifically to the amendment that was circulated in relation to trading hours for Boxing Day. I would just like to put on the record a letter from Karen Berg that was written to Mr Jim Fouras, the member for Ashgrove. I would have to say that, as a result of the events that have occurred since, Jim must have made some very active and successful representations to the minister. Karen stated—

This year the SDA union has taken a matter to the industrial relations commission for consideration in relation to closing retail stores on Boxing Day 26th December 2004 and New Years day 1st January 2005. Mr Fouras as the local member for Ashgrove for which the Woolworths store I work in is not far from your office I would like to ask you to support this request.

Christmas and the New Year is a time traditionally spent with family and friends which now has become a time of exhaustion and sacrifice as many workers in the retail industry spend Christmas Day asleep before having to return to work on Boxing Day. New Year celebrations are tainted by the fact that we can't see in the new year as we have to get up to go to work in 6 hours time. So once again we have to put our job before our private lives. Why is it that this Labor government has made us live to work and not work to live. Many of my fellow co workers and SDA members realised that Sunday trade was inevitable, but Mr Peter Beattie and Mr Gordon Nuttall robbed us of our public holidays. Growing up my father always taught me that the Australian Labor Party would always be a party to support the workers but after the Sunday trade/public holiday issue I lost faith in Peter Beattie and my local member Gordon Nuttall who was industrial relations minister at the time. All we ask is for the opportunity to be able to celebrate the holiday season just like you and your families will. Please support the closure of retail stores for Boxing Day and New Year's day. I will look forward to seeing you the next time you shop at Woolworths and until I would appreciate it a lot if you could pass on my and my fellow co workers feelings in regards to this matter. I will look forward to hearing from you.

Those remonstrations appear to have been successful. Many families are affected by Boxing Day trading, but not so much in my electorate as I represent a rural and regional area. But Christmas and the new year is a time when families get together. I fail to understand why even city people cannot survive for two days without being able to go to the big shops. If people need bread or milk, there are plenty of small retailers who can provide that to them—

Mr Purcell interjected.

Mrs LIZ CUNNINGHAM: That is exactly right. Whether it is a small retailer, a small corner store, or the local garage that sells fuel, people will be able to get their basic staples—their bread and their milk—from them. We do not need Woolworths open, we do not need Coles open, we do not need Myer or DJs open. We do not need to go to the sales one day after Christmas Day. We can survive. I would have to say that I think it is a great step by the Labor government to allow families to have two days off.

I think that we have become big-store dependent. We feel that if we cannot go to Woolies, if we cannot go to Coles, if we cannot go to Myer for one day, we will not survive. The reality is that people in rural and regional Queensland will go a month without going to a big shop and they still seem to manage. So I would say to those people in south-east Queensland that if they do not go to a big store until the day after Boxing Day, they will survive. They will still eat, they will still breathe, they will still have clothes.

An honourable member: The sales will still be on.

Mrs LIZ CUNNINGHAM: The sale will still be on no matter what. So I commend the minister for taking the initiative and allowing families at least two days—Christmas and Boxing Day. I hope that the minister will listen to Karen Berg's remonstrations and give workers New Year's Day off as well.

In relation to the Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation and Other Acts Amendment Bill, there are just a couple of matters that I would like to raise with the minister. References have been made to the coalition government and Santo Santoro as minister and the changes that were made to workers compensation during that period. I would have to acknowledge that I was part of those changes. I hope that, as much as possible, workers are given at least consideration in terms of their needs and their vulnerabilities.

I would like to ask the minister about a couple of issues relating to the changes in the legislation that align the definition of 'wages' for the purpose of calculating workers compensation premiums with most Australian jurisdictions and the alignment with the definition contained in the Pay-roll Tax Act. Previous speakers have said that the changes in this legislation will bring us into line with other states. However, the amendment broadens the definition to include superannuation contributions when paying workers compensation premiums. I seek from the minister clarification as to any categories of employers or businesses that will be detrimentally affected by this change, that is, that will increase their workers compensation obligation. The other issue that I would like to commend the minister for is the provisions in the bill that allow for an additional step-down. In his second reading speech the minister stated—

For example, award and non-award employees who receive 85% of normal weekly earnings for the first 26 weeks will receive 75% of normal weekly earnings ... between 26 and 39 weeks—

This was previously 65 per cent. They then will receive 65 per cent from 39 weeks. I commend the minister for that.

I hope that I have been a great supporter of injured workers. An attempt was made to remove from workers compensation an entitlement for workers if they were injured in the time between when they left their home and when they actually accessed their workplace.

Mr Purcell: Hear, hear! I remember that. You were sitting here and I was sitting there.

Mrs LIZ CUNNINGHAM: And the member was yelling in my ear! I commend the minister if the amendment increases the ability for families to survive, in terms of workers compensation. Eighty per cent of a normal work income is a significant reduction. I know that it is meant to be an incentive to return to work, but if house payments and other obligations have to be met, it is a significant reduction. Allowing them 75 per cent instead of 65 per cent for a period between 26 and 39 weeks is a significant improvement. I certainly commend the minister for that. I also commend the fund for being able to extend that increased benefit.

This Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation and Other Acts Amendment Bill raises many issues. I have not been briefed by the minister's office. I was not offered a briefing. While I support any improvement in services to injured workers, I express the concern voiced by employers in my electorate and other electorates about fees that have not decreased and workplaces where there have been no claims but where they have still had to pay what they regard as inflated workers compensation premiums.

I return to the amendment that the minister has moved in relation to Sunday trading. I hope it is not a one-off. I hope that the minister will continue to have regard to families and the importance of families spending time together. Big companies like Woolworths, Coles Myer and others are interested in the bottom line. They are interested in profit. They are not interested in the people who volunteer to work, although I do not think that there is such a thing as volunteering to work. In years to come I hope that the government will support families and allow them adequate time to be together, to consolidate their relationships and to enjoy Christmas and New Year together, because it is one break in the year when we have the opportunity to re-establish our family ties.