



Speech by

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Hansard Tuesday, 21 August 2007

WORKERS COMPENSATION

Mr MOORHEAD (Waterford—ALP) (11.46 am): Yesterday the Prime Minister stood before the Australian people and introduced what he believed to be a new idea—something which he called aspirational nationalism. Under this somehow bold new proposal, rather than talk about systems of government we should consider the outcomes delivered by government. The underlying theme here is that the new target of Mr Howard's diatribe is state governments. Rather than hold a constitutional convention to consider whether we still need three levels of government, Mr Howard continues to use other levels of government as his drum to beat, distracting attention from the woeful group that makes up his cabinet. But the Prime Minister's words should be seen for the cheap political opportunism that they are. He should be judged not by what he says but by what he does.

The shining beacon that has put the harsh spotlight on Mr Howard's tactics is his proposal to take large businesses out of WorkCover and put them into the federal government's own Comcare scheme. What do Queensland employers have to gain from moving into Mr Howard's Comcare scheme? The answer is that they are actually worse off. The cost of workers compensation insurance under the Comcare scheme is 39 per cent higher than that under the WorkCover scheme here in Queensland. There is also less support for rehabilitation and supervision of injured workers, meaning that employees are away from the workplace longer.

When people do have claims under Comcare they will end up in a lengthy and adversarial tribunal process. In Queensland's WorkCover system, only 3.8 per cent of decisions on claims are disputed. In Queensland 90 per cent of disputes about workers compensation claims are resolved within 90 days while Comcare's track record is absolutely appalling, with more than half of claims taking longer than 90 days. One would think such a grand scheme from Canberra would be designed to make things simpler. If members thought that, unfortunately they are mistaken.

If an employer moves to Comcare and they use labour hire workers or have contractors or even if they have any other business's employees on their site they have to deal with two sets of workplace health and safety laws, not one. The reality of the Comcare scheme is that it was designed for the federal government's largely white-collar employees and has absolutely no comprehension of the safety and compensation systems in place in Queensland businesses.

When you add all that together, what do Queensland businesses face under Comcare? Higher premiums, lower services, longer absences, more legal proceedings, and conflicting and complicating workplace health and safety regimes. Importantly, we should consider those people who rely on workers compensation—Queensland's injured workers. These are the people who because of their work are unable to earn the income they previously had. If the injured workers in our state had been paid benefits under Comcare rather than WorkCover, Queensland workers would have received 20 per cent less in compensation payments. Put simply, injured workers would not only suffer from their injuries but would also be out of pocket under Comcare.

Many Queensland workers travelled to work today in the knowledge that if they are injured on their way to work WorkCover will assist them back to work and compensate them for the loss of earning capacity. Unfortunately, those workers under Comcare drive to work each day without the protection of

workers compensation. We now have the disgraceful situation where workers must negotiate with their employer and bargain away conditions in order to obtain journey cover in their certified agreement or workplace agreement.

When it comes to preventing injuries we find that in the workplace the Comcare scheme has only 50 safety inspectors for the whole of Australia. The Queensland Office of Workplace Health and Safety has more than 250 inspectors. When we look at the outcomes, as Mr Howard asks, we see that Comcare is costly for employers and disastrous for injured workers. I say to Queensland employers and employees, 'Do not fall for this tragic ruse. This is simply another stunt from the federal government in the lead-up to this year's election.'