



Speech by  
**Mike Horan**

**MEMBER FOR TOOWOOMBA SOUTH**

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## **WORKERS' COMPENSATION AND REHABILITATION AND OTHER ACTS AMENDMENT BILL**

**Mr HORAN** (Toowoomba South—NPA) (4.27 pm): This is an important bill because it extends the reforms to WorkCover initiated during the time of the Borbidge government. It is important to look at not only the way that WorkCover has acted upon those reforms but also the partnerships that have developed between employers and employees, the costs to the employers and the benefits to the employees and, particularly, what can still be done to reduce accidents. Whilst it is important to have a scheme that provides for workers who have been injured on site, it is even more important that we work towards having no injuries or accidents at all by implementing safer work practices.

It can be a dreadful thing for both a family and a business when someone is injured at work. Nobody likes to see that. When debating WorkCover issues we often discuss the costs of the scheme or the benefits that it provides. However, we should always remember that the most important thing is to make workplaces safer. People should be able to go to work to provide a living for their families and to help business to prosper, and they should be able to return home safely.

I want to speak about the state that this system was in when we came to government in 1996. I would like to compliment two people—Santo Santoro, who was the then minister, and Mr Jim Kennedy—for the work that was done in improving a system that was absolutely dysfunctional, moribund and in virtual financial ruin, with a financial black hole of about \$320 million. Through a lot of difficulty for both employers and employees, they quite smartly put that system into a far better position. I do give credit that those reforms have been continued, and further advice has been taken from Mr Jim Kennedy to bring about ongoing and continued improvement.

I think I am right in saying that the Borbidge government provided a major injection of funds into the system because it was in such dire financial straits. That happened at the time that that same government brought about massive reform in the number of police officers, with the second major police academy; the M1 motorway to the Gold Coast, which was funded and almost completed in that short space of time; and the massive health reforms, with the \$2.4 billion hospital rebuilding program, the elimination of one level of bureaucracy and bringing about surgery on time, which delivered 13,000 more operations in two years than occurred before that. It was a time of great reform by the coalition government, and workers compensation was one of the most important reforms undertaken at that time. Santo Santoro had an enormous capacity for work and diligence. I compliment him on what he did. He, along with the contribution of Mr Jim Kennedy, who produced the Kennedy report at the time, has left an enduring legacy and a very important legacy for Queensland.

I want to also speak about the Toowoomba office of WorkCover, which has outstanding leadership and outstanding staff. I can remember a number of years back, particularly when I first got into parliament, when there were often issues. I think the reforms that have been made to WorkCover have dramatically reduced the issues and complaints that people have—people wanting to have matters reviewed because they were not happy with what happened. In recent years, with the ongoing reforms and the diligent work of the staff in the Toowoomba office, I could not speak more highly of an office. They take the time to visit

local members when there are any adjustments or changes to ensure we are well informed as to what is happening so that if there are any queries or concerns from constituents we are aware of it. Mostly it is an open door; we can take any issues there and have them dealt with quickly. That is the sign of a good office and a office that is there to look after their customers, who are the people who work and the people who employ them.

As I said, there is a real responsibility and partnership in issues to do with workplace insurance. It is important for employers to make sure that their business is safe, that everybody is well instructed, that every possible care and attention is given to the safety of employees. Likewise, it is important for employees to ensure that they act in a responsible way, that they follow the instruction and training that they have been given, and that they do everything they can to ensure that there are no injuries, as there is nothing worse in a workplace than seeing those injuries occur.

Some workplaces are a lot more, if you like, dangerous or more difficult to work in. I remember that when I ran the Toowoomba showgrounds there were different categories of premiums. The premiums we paid for those who worked inside, such as the clerical staff in the office, were a lot less than those paid for our staff who worked outside, who were often working with heavy machinery or with cattle and horses at rodeos. There were rock concerts and all sorts of outside events, such as home shows and so on, where the work was difficult—working with heavy loads, shifting and re-arranging, and working with time constraints. They were wonderful employees. I was always extremely grateful for the loyalty that they provided. I think that is the important thing in any working partnership—to have loyal staff who like working for an organisation, who are cared for and who in return care for the organisation that they work for.

There are a number of provisions in this bill. The minister in his second reading speech commented on the reduction in premiums that occurred earlier this year. I have talked about the partnership, the two sides of the formula. There has been a reduction in premiums to make them the lowest average premium rate of any state in Australia for the eighth year running, and I give credit for that. This bill provides—separate to the reductions in premiums that occurred earlier in the year—additional benefits to workers who have been injured. In particular, there are changes to the step down arrangements and also changes for those who have been severely injured and, in the case of fatalities, for the families of those people. I think it is good to see—and it gives me a lot of pleasure to have been part of that government that began the original reforms, because I know the pain and difficulty of doing what we had to do—that the system has been continued by subsequent governments and that Queensland is still in front in terms of what we provide to our employees and employers in this regard.

The other thing I want to touch on is workplace health and safety. I note in particular the establishment of a licensing review committee. The minister's second reading speech mentioned that this provision will assist in sharing information about incidents involving amusement devices that travel interstate on the show circuit. I know that within the Showmen's Guild there are wonderful Australian families—many of them fifth generation or more who have been born into the show circuit. It is a fascinating system, passing on from generation to generation. When there are marriages between show families, they provide a certain amount of frontage. They still measure the show frontage in feet. There are some wonderful families who do that. They want to ensure that their rides and amusement devices are safe. Because they are moving all the time—they do a show for three or four days, load up and off they go somewhere else, another couple of hundred kilometres—it is a very important part of their operation to ensure that each and every time those rides or amusement devices are put up they are safe.

I know that the rides are a lot different, a lot safer, now than they used to be. I once went into the Slim Dusty tent when I was a boy in grade 4 at school. I put my hand up to get a shilling for riding a horse around the arena. I do not know how this came under workplace health and safety, but they put a harness on me and there was a rope up over a pulley in the top of the tent in case you fell off the horse. He said, 'Run and jump on this springboard and jump on the horse as it goes round.' I think I was eight years old at the time. I was in my St Lawrence's school uniform. I ran and jumped on the springboard and they pulled on the rope and up I went to the top of tent and went round and round while everyone laughed. You came down to the bottom and they gave you a shilling. In terms of workplace health and safety, I do not know how well that went. But it certainly gave the crowd its money's worth. The sideshows have changed a lot since then. There are not so many tent shows now; there are semitrailers with hydraulic systems and the rides go up quickly. It is all about time and wages and so forth. But I was interested in that remark in the second reading speech and wondered whether the minister could comment on exactly what the bill is on about there. It refers to the sharing of information about incidents involving amusement rides that travel interstate on the show circuit. I presume it is about trying to get information about incidents or accidents that have occurred elsewhere so that those problems can be rectified and incidents do not happen again.

There are some provisions in this bill to do with electrical safety, particularly ensuring that electrical work is supervised or performed only by someone with a relevant electrical work licence. The key issue is that this bill brings about ongoing adjustments and changes and that it continues on from those groundbreaking reforms that were put in place during the years of the Borbidge government.

Before the 1995 election, when the Goss government was returned with a margin of one and about six months later subsequently lost a by-election and government changed, one of the things that I felt a great disappointment with in the system of government at the time was that nothing was said before that election about the absolute financial mess that the Goss government had got the workers compensation system into in Queensland. It was only after the election that it was revealed that there was a \$320 million mess. It is to the great credit of not only the Borbidge government but also in particular Santo Santoro and Jim Kennedy that that system was fixed up. There was an injection of funds put in to get the system back on its feet. Since then it has proved to be one of the most robust and successful WorkCover systems in Australia. I think that is a great credit to Queensland and the political parties of both sides that have played major roles. It gives great comfort and support to the workers and the employers of this state to have such a system in place. I am pleased to join with my colleague, the shadow minister, in supporting this bill.