




Speech By  
**Curtis Pitt**

**MEMBER FOR MULGRAVE**

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**INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS (FAIR WORK ACT HARMONISATION NO. 2) AND  
OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Mr PITT** (Mulgrave—ALP) (3.41 pm): This is an appalling piece of legislation. It is the latest in a long line of appalling bits of legislation offered by this appalling Attorney-General. It attacks the hard-won workplace rights of decent Queenslanders. It undermines the conditions of low-paid, hardworking public servants. It goes even further than John Howard's maligned and much hated Work Choices legislation. This bill is abhorrent to Queensland Labor and will have a real and material impact on working Queenslanders. Sadly, we have become very used to the Attorney-General presenting awful legislation in this parliament—bill after bill stripping away workplace rights, bill after bill attacking fundamental legislative principles. In fact, he almost seems to enjoy this, but we should never forget that the Attorney-General is not a lone figure in this government. He acts with the approval and sanction of the Premier, the cabinet and the entire LNP backbench who, by supporting this legislation, are complicit in the effects it will have on workers in their electorates.

It must be a great comfort to the Premier and the entire government that they have an Attorney-General who is willing to be the smirking public face of the government's ideological assault on public sector workers. The Premier must be very satisfied that he has an Attorney-General he can trot out to do the dirtiest work of his government. If I could just offer the Attorney-General a warning, though, it would be that all of his loyalty and his preparedness to do the dirty work will not save him when his meanness comes back to bite him. The Premier will not give a second thought to casting the Attorney-General aside when the time comes, and let me assure the Attorney-General that that time will come. I would say it took the Premier more than a little while to act when it came to the members for Moggill and Mudgeeraba when their misdeeds became public knowledge. That would be giving the Premier credit for acting and actually imposing the high standards he promised Queenslanders, but to date it seems to have only been felt by the member for Gympie.

If the Premier were to cut the Attorney-General loose and install someone in the position who had a chance of garnering the respect of the legal profession and the broader Queensland public, including people working in industrial unions, at least he could get someone who has some experience. Then again, the Premier has experience in this space—sacking in excess of 14,000 government workers, as he has stated publically. Perhaps the fact that the Premier this morning failed to answer a question about how many public servants have been sacked by this government is an indication that his mind is otherwise occupied on matters such as how to move on the member for Kawana. So I would suggest to the Attorney-General that if he is enjoying the role of being the tough talker on 'anything and everything' he should enjoy it while he can, because it will not last. I will hazard the prediction that the Attorney-General may well meet a political end that will not be at a time of his choosing.

I also take this opportunity to warn the Premier that if he thinks he can hide behind the Attorney-General he is sorely mistaken. I will not let him and Labor will not let him. It is a government decision to strip away workers' rights, and as the head of the government the Premier is responsible

for that decision. Let me say this to government backbenchers: we will make sure that their constituents know how they voted to strip away workers' rights with this bill today. The members for Caloundra, Kallangur, Toowoomba North, Logan, Springwood, Cook, Waterford and Burleigh would know by now that Labor has candidates on the ground in their electorates. Our strong candidates will be out in their electorates telling people about how their MP voted to take away workers' rights. But MPs in other electorates should not feel like they can get away with their actions today, and nor should they feel left out. Fear not: we will have candidates in their seats soon.

I was particularly disappointed to read a front-page article in the *Courier-Mail* on 1 November in which the Minister for Health tried to suggest that there was some nefarious, evil, secret scheme going on in which Queensland Health workers were paid allowances for performing particular duties. First of all, it should not come as a surprise to anyone that there are a number of allowances built into current enterprise bargaining agreements. This is a standard practice in both the private and public sectors. It allows employers to differentiate between different tasks performed by employees and pay them appropriately for each task. Allowances also make sure that workers are not required to perform tasks that are outside of their normal job description without being compensated. The minister tried to suggest that these were somehow lucrative bonuses paid out to union fat cats when nothing could be further from the truth.

The main example used in the article is that staff are sometimes paid an extra \$1.56 per day for cleaning soiled linen. It is hardly on the level of bonuses handed out to private sector employees all of the time. It is a demonstration of just how callous, cruel and cold this government and this health minister can be. When we are talking about changing bed linen, it is not like changing bed linen at home. Many of us will be familiar with what it is like to change sheets after a child has wet the bed. That is what you do as a parent. But hospital orderlies have to deal with situations that are orders of magnitude much worse than that. Although the Leader of the Opposition has already said this, it is worth saying again. When giving evidence to the committee, AWU State Secretary Ben Swan explained what this allowance is actually for. He stated—

Cleaning laundry in a hospital is not like cleaning laundry at home. You are talking about things that are infected with pus, vomit, blood, faeces, urine and all the other things that go on with that. You are talking about linen that on occasion includes discarded needles, some of which may have been exposed to persons with particular infections. This is not giggles sort of scenarios in a hospital environment. These are the people who are doing the most unglamorous work in hospitals who earn, compared to other professionals or other people working in hospitals, nowhere near what they deserve, in my opinion.

This is difficult work but work that needs to be done. It is only fair that we pay people appropriately for doing that work.

Queensland Labor understands and appreciates the people who do this work for the health system. We will not stand by when the health minister ridicules hospital cleaners and ward staff. Thankfully the people of Queensland were not fooled by this one-trick pony health minister and they will not be fooled by this legislation. I read the letters to the editor in the next day's *Courier-Mail* with some interest and not one of them had fallen for the government's spin. They bring common sense to the minister's ideological rant. Max Tanzer from Elliott Heads wrote—

I have never worked for any government enterprise, but after a lifetime working for private enterprise, from corner engineering workshops to BHP, I can assure him that extra payments are paid by every employer that I ever worked with, for these types of unpleasant and sometimes dangerous conditions. If the State Government succeeds in removing these payments it may not be able to get people to do its dirty work. If that then leads to having these tasks done by private companies, the costs will be much higher.

R Hamlet of Pittsworth hit the nail on the head when they said—

Just for the record, I am fine with hospital cleaners being paid \$1.50 extra a day to wash soiled bedsheets. Excessive allowances for politicians I do have a problem with.

That is the point: the Newman government got caught giving itself a massive pay rise, but it is happy to lower the pay of hospital workers, and therein lies the problem for this government—doing one thing for itself and making Queenslanders come a distant second.

I want to take a moment to reflect on how these changes are particularly bad for regional Queenslanders like the people in my electorate of Mulgrave. These laws strip workers' rights everywhere and they will be bad for workers everywhere, but they will impact particularly harshly on regional communities. Public sector workers are integral parts of regional communities. They provide essential services and they bring money into the town. This legislation is designed to drive down working conditions of public sector workers. It is designed to drive down the working conditions of teachers, the working conditions of nurses and the working conditions of correctional service employees. This will have a disproportionate effect on regional communities. This will happen for three reasons. Firstly, in most regional centres government workers are a larger percentage of the workforce than Queensland as a whole. In Far North Queensland, for example, taking in my electorate of Mulgrave and the electorates of Cairns, Barron River and Cook, 9.2 per cent of the

workforce is employed in public administration and safety. This compares to a state-wide figure of just 6.7 per cent. The second reason is that regional communities are more dependent on local salaries flowing through their local businesses. Brisbane has a more diverse economy than regional centres like Cairns which means that often when one sector is hurting it has a lower impact on the overall economy. The third reason is that, because these economies are less diverse, it often becomes necessary for people who have been laid off or who have had their working conditions and pay reduced by so much to start looking for jobs elsewhere.

People are forced to move away from towns in which they have built their lives and families because of the cruel actions of a callous government. These people could be the tuckshop lady, someone who volunteers for the rural fire brigade, or somebody who works in the SES. These are all people who often have to have other jobs. When they disappear because of the actions of this Newman government, towns are left wanting and there is a void that needs to be filled. I know people who have been forced to move away from the towns in which they lived. I know that is not something that they wanted to do. I have met with families in my office who have had to do just that. This is real. That is something that I think the members of this chamber need to appreciate. This is not a hypothetical; these are real families who are going to have massive impacts from this legislation. When you hit the Public Service like this government has time and time again, you hit regional communities the worst. The members of the Newman government who represent regional areas should be hanging their heads in shame.

I will finish where I started. This is a horrible piece of legislation. It takes away the rights and protections of hardworking, decent Queenslanders. It is the next step in the LNP's relentless assault on the Queensland public sector. It is yet another broken promise from a Premier who told public servants that they had nothing to fear from him. I will not be supporting this legislation and neither will anybody in the Labor caucus. Certainly, I know that it is going to be opposed every step of the way not only within this chamber but also by all of those who will assemble at a rally this afternoon and those in the broader labour movement in Queensland.

On numerous occasions we have seen this government use harmonisation as something that it can hide behind. This is not harmonisation; this is cherry picking. This bill is dolled up and dressed up to be something that is not. But then again, that is what we have come to expect from the Newman government.