




Speech By
Andrew Powell

MEMBER FOR GLASS HOUSE

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**WORKERS' COMPENSATION AND REHABILITATION AND OTHER
LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL; WORKERS' COMPENSATION AND
REHABILITATION (PROTECTING FIREFIGHTERS) AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Mr POWELL** (Glass House—LNP) (12.10 am): I rise this evening—rather, this morning—to support the LNP's Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation (Protecting Firefighters) Amendment Bill 2015 and to oppose the Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2015 put forward by the Palaszczuk Labor government. I do this for two reasons. Firstly, the electorate of Glass House is very fortunate to be so well served and protected by some 19 voluntary rural fire brigades and two auxiliary fire services. If it were not for the tireless efforts of those rural fire brigades, Glass House would not be the great place it is to live and work today. The second reason is that Glass House relies almost entirely on small and medium businesses to provide employment opportunities not only to the residents of Glass House but also to the surrounding areas. But let me first come back to the rural firefighters.

A couple of my colleagues have raised these matters already this evening, but I think the best way for me to demonstrate the difference between what the LNP's bill offers and what the government's bill does not offer is to use the submissions made to the committee by the Maroochy South Rural Fire Brigades Group. Hamish Murdoch is the group officer and he is also involved in one of my rural fire brigades at Eudlo. In regard to the LNP bill, he writes—

The Maroochy South Rural Fire Brigades Group represents 10 Rural Fire Brigades on the Sunshine Coast: Bli Bli, Kiel Mountain, West Woombye, Obi Obi, Kureelipa, Mapleton, Montville, Palmwoods, Eudlo and Ilkley. These brigades are supported by some 250 volunteer fire fighters.

We support this proposed amendment because volunteer Rural fire fighters would receive the same degree of cover for the prescribed cancers as Urban fire fighters, Auxiliary fire fighters and paid Rural Operations staff.

We acknowledge the efforts to the Queensland Parliament to address this important reform which will be of great benefit to Rural volunteer firefighters.

The letter is signed—

Hamish Murdoch

Group Officer

His submission on behalf of his group to the government's bill is unfortunately not as complimentary. He again is writing on behalf of the Maroochy South Rural Fire Brigades Group. He goes on to state—

We would like to make the following points regarding the proposed legislation:

1. Our view is that this legislation discriminates—

discriminates—

against volunteer Rural fire fighters. Our understanding is that Urban, Auxiliary and paid Rural Operations employees who perform firefighting duties only have to attend a single incident to qualify for cover under this legislation. Volunteer rural firefighters have to attend 150 events before they can qualify for coverage.

2. According to Schedule 4A a volunteer Rural fire fighter will have to attend 150 events within a 5 year period to qualify for cover for the most aggressive cancers. This means that the volunteer has to attend an average of 30 events in a fire season. It is our view that this is a performance figure that would be rarely achieved by even the most enthusiastic volunteer.

3. We seek confirmation of the science which shows that there is a difference between the effects of smoke on an Urban fire fighter, Auxiliary fire fighter or a paid Rural Operations member of staff compared to a Rural volunteer fire fighter.

4. We certainly disagree with the methodology of counting the number of incidents attended in a day. It is quite possible that a volunteer can do a full shift on the downwind side of a single vegetation fire and therefore be constantly breathing in a toxic atmosphere. This would be very different to attending two small fires on the same day which may be controlled very easily with little or no smoke issues.

Hamish goes on to state—

We acknowledge the efforts of the Queensland Parliament to address this important reform which will be of great benefit to Rural volunteer firefighters.

At this point I acknowledge the work of the committee, particularly the members of the LNP but also the government members who have stood up to their own government and said, 'Yes, the LNP got it right; Labor got it wrong. We need to ensure that volunteer rural firefighters are not discriminated against, that they have the same opportunity to access this protection against these insidious cancers as auxiliary and urban firefighters do.' So I applaud the work of the committee. I understand that the government are moving amendments to their bill, but it should not have been necessary in the first place. If they had taken the lead from the LNP, if they had heard the voices that were coming from our rural firefighters across the electorates, including my own, then these amendments would not have been necessary.

I mentioned that the second reason I will be voting against the government's bill and supporting the opposition's bill is that the electorate of Glass House relies almost solely on small and medium enterprises for employment opportunities in the electorate not only for residents of the electorate but also for neighbouring electorates. We in the LNP believe a number of things. We do believe that workers should be protected when they go to work. We do believe that it is small and medium enterprises that ultimately create jobs. It is not the government; it is small and medium enterprises. The reality is that if we make it impossible for small and medium enterprises to operate then unfortunately there are no jobs for us to protect workers from. There will simply be no jobs.

Ms Grace interjected.

Mr POWELL: I hear the interjections from the other side, but what we saw under the Beattie-Bligh era was increasing red tape and increasing costs driving small and medium enterprises to the wall to the point where they were cutting staff, where they were going back to basically being single operators, mum and dad operators. That meant that employees who we are trying to protect did not have jobs to go to in the first place.

The work we did as a government to get the balance right between protecting workers and ensuring that WorkCover premiums were far more manageable is exemplary. I have had any number of small business owners come to me and say, 'Please stand up to what the Labor government are proposing in their legislation. It is unfair. It is going to send our backs to the wall again. Our premiums are going to go up.'

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms Farmer): Order! The level of conversation in the House is rising. I know it is very late, but could members please try to keep their conversation to a minimum or take them outside?

Mr POWELL: 'Please,' they would say to me, 'stand up against what the Labor government are proposing. What we have achieved is right. In particular, what they are proposing in terms of the repeal of the common law threshold, the retrospective nature of that repeal and the prohibition of claims history to be provided to employers will be devastating for us and our ability to employ locals and to employ people from around the Sunshine Coast and the Moreton Bay Regional Council areas.'

The member for Kawana earlier referred to one particular example. The electorate of Glass House is blessed to have some of the best horticultural land in the state.

Mr Bennett: Second.

Mr POWELL: Best. I take the interjection from the member for Burnett. He is delusional tonight. It is very late, I understand. We have the best horticultural land in the state. We have wonderful pineapple and strawberry growers. What would happen because of the seasonal nature of the work is

that we would have casual employees come in for the picking seasons and would move from one operation to another. What they were finding was that there were a number of employees—and I will stress a small number, not a lot but a small number—who would actually game the system. From one year to the next they would turn up at a different strawberry farm or a different pineapple farm, spend two days on the job, injure their back, put in a claim, be successful, drive up the premiums of the operator, take the rest of the season off, turn up the following season at a new farm and do the same thing all over again. One clear example of the sensibility of the LNP government's amendments to workers compensation was the ability for an employer to ask for a claims history and to be able to find these individuals who game the system and in so doing drive up the premium costs of the employers.

Earlier this evening we heard the Treasurer talk about amending the firefighting aspect of this bill because the government was listening. Again, the government should amend the other aspects of the bill; in fact, they should throw out their bill altogether and support the LNP's bill because of what it does, as clearly they are not listening. Others mentioned what the CCIQ wrote to each and every one of us yesterday outlining their serious concerns with that proposed. The CCIQ is opposed to the proposal to introduce a statutory adjustment scheme. In respect of retaining employees' access to an individual's work history, the CCIQ recommends that this provision remain in the legislation in the interests of the benefits to employees and the duty of care and in turn employer wellbeing and safety.

We have a clear choice tonight—support a well-thought-through bill which supports rural firefighters alongside auxiliary and urban firefighters and which supports small and medium enterprises throughout Queensland or support Labor's bill that sees both destroyed.