




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR LOGAN

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

 **Mr POWER** (Logan—ALP) (12.51 pm): I rise to speak in support of the restoration of common law rights for injured workers in the Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2015.

Queensland's workers compensation scheme is the best performing scheme in the country. It is in a strong financial position, which enables it to provide a fair balance between low-cost premiums for employers and good benefits for injured workers, and today we enhance that. WorkCover is the sole commercial insurer in Queensland's workers compensation scheme and provides policies to over 150,000 Queensland employers. WorkCover is self-funded from revenue received through premiums and return on investments.

Under the Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation Act 2003, WorkCover is required to remain fully funded, that is, total assets must be equal to its total liabilities. In addition, Queensland Treasury requires that WorkCover maintain a buffer of 20 per cent, resulting in a funding ratio of a minimum of 120 per cent. As at 30 June 2015, WorkCover's funding ratio was a strong 169 per cent, which is well above the 120 per cent required for WorkCover to be fully funded. WorkCover's total equity has increased from \$1.5 billion in 2013-14 to \$1.7 billion and, as at 30 June 2015, it has approximately \$4 billion in funds under management.

The strong performance of WorkCover today can in part be attributed to the previous Labor government's 2010 workers compensation scheme reforms. As a result of the 2010 reforms common law claims have reduced by 15 per cent since 2011-12 and total annual common law claim payments and the average cost of a damages claim have reduced by around 10 per cent over the period 2009-10 to 2013-14. In light of this very strong financial position, WorkCover has been able to maintain its low average premium rate for employers at \$1.20 per \$100 of wages in 2015-16.

Queensland's average premium rate is currently the lowest of any scheme in the country. The average premium rate is set each year by the WorkCover board based on the advice of its actuary, in this case PricewaterhouseCoopers. The average premium rate takes into account a number of factors including expected wages growth, the number of claims anticipated to be received from injuries sustained in that year and investment returns. WorkCover is also committed to working with employers on an individual level and has also made significant improvements in the way it calculates individual employer premiums over recent years. In particular, it has introduced a new method of calculating individual premiums for small employers—such as the member for Maryborough was talking about—with payrolls of less than \$1.5 million in wages which discounts the claims costs incurred. This is aimed at easing financial pressure and uncertainty on small businesses and enables them to feel the benefits of improving workplace safety sooner.

Not only is Queensland's workers compensation scheme performing well financially, it is also one of Australia's most efficient schemes, with 80 per cent of the premiums collected being used to benefit injured workers through claims expenses and only 20 per cent being used to cover non-claim expenses such as operating costs, grants and levies. It is clear that Queensland's workers compensation scheme has strong foundations and that WorkCover is well positioned to absorb the cost of removing the unfair common law threshold from 31 January 2015 without impacting on the average premium rate or its solvency target. I note also that this has been confirmed by actuarial modelling by PricewaterhouseCoopers, who modelled the impact on solvency of removing the threshold from 31 January 2015 and maintaining the average premium rate at \$1.20 per \$100 of wages paid. The Palaszczuk Labor government is committed to working with the WorkCover Queensland board to ensure that low premiums are maintained and workers receive fair compensation. I now turn—

Miss Barton interjected.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms Grace): Order! The interjections are not being taken. Can we please have order in the House.

Mr POWER: I turn now to the changes to the protection of firefighters that reverse the presumption of certain cancers for firefighters. I notice that the temporary friends of firefighters today sing the praises of those who risk their lives to save ours and protect our property from fire. However, that was not always the case. In the last term of government what did those opposite say about the very firefighters who were advocating for these changes when they tried to express these views publicly? The LNP said that they were 'fake' firefighters, 'pretend' firefighters. They said that they were 'dressed up' as firefighters and they said they were really 'strippers'. The men and women who risk their lives one day were trashed the next. One member of the old front bench whom the member for Kawana still supports today said that they were people 'masquerading' as firefighters and that the last time they saw a fire was when they were camping. That is shameful. John Oliver of the firefighters union made it clear when he said in February 2014—

Fires have tried to talk with the government for two years, their only response to us has been arrogance and belligerence.

John Oliver further stated that the reality was that all the firefighting volunteers who campaigned for those laws and other protections were professional firefighters. I cannot take any member on the other side of the House seriously who does not begin their speech in this debate with a sincere apology to all those firefighters for their previous arrogance and belligerence in the last term of government. I have heard a lot from the other side about our attitude to firefighters, especially rural firefighters—

Miss Barton interjected.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! Member for Broadwater, I have given you some latitude—


Miss BARTON: I rise to a point of order. With due respect, the member for Logan did not afford me the same courtesy when I was—

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! There is no point of order; resume your seat. I have given you some latitude. There will be no further interjections or else I will warn you.

Mr POWER: I support rural firefighters and I recognise the great work that our rural firefighters do, especially the volunteers at Chambers Flat, Greenbank, Jimboomba—which I share with the member for Beaudesert—and of course the Logan Village Rural Fire Brigade, which all serve the electorate of Logan. I most recently spoke with members of the Logan Village Rural Fire Brigade at the Logan Village Country and Music Festival, where they were spreading the fire message and giving kids a ride on the little red fire wagon.

I am pleased that rural firefighters are being supported by this bill, and I commend the committee and the minister for listening to the information before them. I was really disappointed when I heard that one of the members opposite said, 'Why do you hate rural firefighters?' Like everyone on this side of the House I find those comments both insulting and demeaning, and I think it diminished the integrity of the arguments they put forward. The member for Barron River, who is a second generation volunteer firefighter, has served as a volunteer firefighter together with his father for over 50 years.

This bill restores the right of those injured to seek common law compensation when the injury is less than five per cent loss of capacity. In the case of a firefighter, that might mean that they could be injured while risking their life to save others. They might lose less than five per cent capacity but they may not be able to continue to serve as a firefighter even with that diminished loss of capacity. In effect, they would lose their chosen career in public service saving our lives.

 **Mr POWER** (Logan—ALP) (3.38 pm), continuing: As I said before, I am disappointed that in this debate members opposite have used words such as 'discriminatory' and 'discrimination' and have said

things like, 'You hate firefighters,' when we on this side support firefighters and especially volunteer firefighters.

This bill restores the right of those injured to seek compensation where their injury would be less than five per cent loss of capacity. In the case of a firefighter, that could mean that they could be injured while saving the lives of others. They might lose less than five per cent capacity but they would not be able to continue to serve as a firefighter. In effect, they would lose their chosen career in the Public Service. If I were of a similar mind to those opposite, I might indignantly claim of the LNP: why do they hate firefighters? But I know they do not hate firefighters, and I would not say that because it would lower the tone of this debate. But on this they are wrong in that they are not supporting firefighters who take risks to ensure the safety of others and the safety of property.

This is serious for me. As the Labor candidate in the 2014 election campaign I went door to door in Heritage Park and met a man who had served as a Queensland firefighter for over 20 years. I thanked him for his public service and asked what it was like to be a firefighter. We talked of the science that made him more likely than me to develop a range of cancers because of his service. I made a pledge to him to support the research and science and to change the law to recognise the presumption of causation of a range of cancers to support firefighters. Today I honour that pledge. I stand with firefighters, not just opportunistically for political gain. I will return to that house to thank him again and tell him that a promise made on the streets of Heritage Park was delivered in the Queensland parliament on this day. I commend the bill to the House.