




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR MOUNT ISA

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INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS (RESTORING FAIRNESS) AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr KATTER** (Mount Isa—KAP) (10.44 pm): I rise to make a contribution on the Industrial Relations (Restoring Fairness) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill and to speak in support of this bill that will replace the changes made. Over five months local governments across Queensland have been negotiating new enterprise bargaining agreements under the Newman government's modernisation criteria, shrinking the number of awards operating within many councils from over a dozen—sometimes up to 18—down to one. However, one issue I have is that many of the EBAs that were made were done figuratively with their hands tied behind their backs with a number of exclusion rules, some of which are very relevant to my area and have an impact on the way that those EBAs end up. It is a lot of the innuendo that is not written into those clauses that has some impact on how they end up. They are not always clear in black and white, but it does end up with an imbalance with how that agreement is made. I think that imbalance went too far under those changes.

Since that time we have heard from many council workers who are concerned about the changes in the conditions to their jobs and job security. Many in other facets of the public sector are losing their jobs. I also engaged very heavily with mayors and CEOs thanks to a very spirited campaign by the LGAQ. About three or four weekends ago I received a copy of some electronic media that was sent to all mayors around Queensland giving my mobile number and the member for Dalrymple's mobile number. I received a number of calls from mayors and, quite frankly, some of the information they gave me was misguided. The first media I read in relation to this was that it was terrible because they were going from 18 awards down to one and back up to 18 again which was completely unmanageable. That was the main basis for their response, which of course concerned me. I thought that I had better educate myself on this issue because that does not sound too good. I then found out that at most it was going back up to three. That is quite different to what those people were telling me. They were telling me unequivocally that it was going back up to 18 and that that was a big problem for them. I was told that it was going to cause many job losses. I thought that that was a worry. However, upon further investigation, I found that many of those job losses related to general cutbacks in spent government funding to councils and the phasing out of funding exercises such as flood damage that have been happening for years. Those figures were collected and touted as the job losses that were going to occur. They are a terrible thing, but we cannot say that they are directly related to this.

The other issue I had with some of the information that was coming back to me was that in the same conversation I was being told that these changes are going to cause job losses, which of course would concern me. The job losses were because they were expecting to achieve a lower award and only be able to pay them less or have less output on wages so that they could save money to keep employing more people. Presumably that was the rationale, but there was a severe flaw in this rationale because in the same conversation they were saying that they have to pay them above the awards to get them out there in the first place. I do not see what the problem is. If you are paying

them more already, then how are you going to lose money if these EBAs are not allowed to go through? It did not make sense. There was a severe flaw in that, so that made me question some of the advice that I was getting. The changes being put forward today will ensure bargaining can take place in a way that I believe is fair to both sides of the agreement. I acknowledge that there will always be tension between any corporate entity, be it a council or a large business, and their workers, but we need to strike a harmonious balance between both stakeholders. From my investigations after speaking to a large number of council employees and public sector employees, this is where we landed.

This bill seeks to achieve fairness by removing the restrictions placed on negotiations in relation to certain protections, which is especially relevant to my electorate. One of those protections that I alluded to earlier was locality allowances. Some CEOs and mayors have said that that allowance is almost always needed in an award to get people to go out to remote areas. So I do not understand why such an allowance should be excluded. I do not see the merit in that argument.

Another point to be made is that these changes to the industrial award that applied to a lot of these councils came amid a suite of fiscal tightening measures that came with the last government. Whether they were needed or not, they were conveniently married with this opportunity for them to save money on wages. That makes me question the motivation of why it was brought in in the first place.

The provisions to limit contracting is an issue that is very close to my heart and, as a party, it is an issue that we feel very strongly about. Whether we are talking about NDRAA and the day-labour issues, where the local council can do that work and it does not have to be done by contractors from outside, the same applies with local council employees. If you have a pay clerk doing a job, quite possibly on occasions you can get a pay clerk to do that job cheaper. But as the Premier said once in the House, these Public Service jobs and some of these council jobs are the bedrock of our rural towns. There are very fragile communities out there. Over the past couple of days I have spoken on the phone to a worker from my electorate. She said, 'We had moved out west into your electorate, Robbie. My husband had a business. It was not going well and I was losing the security in my job under the awards they had. We have left town.' Part of the reason for that couple leaving town was the insecurity of that Public Service job. Perhaps that will not apply in all cases, but job insecurity is a factor. If there is the possibility of contracts threatening job security in rural areas, it is another pressure on people and it takes away the incentive for people to stay in rural towns. They are very big issues for me. Quite rightly, councils, mayors and CEOs have to look for savings. Those councils are doing it tough but, if they are looking at hiring contractors, we are all stuffed. There are other ways to achieve this balance.

This is where I got quite upset with the LGAQ. I did not have the LGAQ or mayors ringing me when the TIDS grants were cut in half. That had a much bigger impact on rural areas. Any reduction in FAGs in the western council areas has a massive impact. We had been pushing that issue with a number of mayors, but I did not have some of these mayors and CEOs ringing me up saying, 'We really need the FAGs grants' when I know that it is a big issue and I know that these grants could be of great benefit to them. It was, 'This is the issue that we are going to die in a ditch on. The sky is going to fall in because of this issue because we can save some money on wages.' I did not buy that. I was quite angry with the LGAQ, because I think there was a big political push in this. I think there was some uncertainty in the way the LGAQ was pushing it.

The issues that I want to push are increases in road funding to these councils, particularly to those western councils, and increases in TIDS funding and FAGs. It is through increased funding through those grants that viability will return to those councils, not through cutting the wages of workers. I do not walk around town and say, 'Gee whiz, these council workers are paid too much.' They are always the lowest paid workers around town and they are the ones who the council is going to start with. That is where they are going to cut costs and save a big heap of money. It does not wash with me, so I will be supporting this bill.