



Speech By
Tim Nicholls

MEMBER FOR CLAYFIELD

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MOTION

Black Lung Disease

 **Mr NICHOLLS** (Clayfield—LNP) (Leader of the Opposition) (6.02 pm): I move—

That this House calls on the government to establish a commission of inquiry within 30 days of today's date into the re-emergence of 'black lung disease' in coalmining workers.

Queensland has a long and proud history as a mining state—rich in natural resources that have driven our economic growth and been a key contributor to improving standards of living and prosperity across the state, especially in regional Queensland. We understand and recognise the importance of this industry and the hundreds of thousands of jobs it has provided across the state and through the decades. We also recognise the importance of ensuring that the health and wellbeing of those who work in the industry and have worked in the industry in the past are at the forefront of government policy settings.

Over many months now we have seen and read media reports about the re-emergence of pneumoconiosis, or coalminers' black lung disease, in Queensland. Pneumoconiosis, or 'black lung', is a potentially fatal disease caused by long exposure to coal dust. It commonly stems from working in the coal industry or in manufacturing of graphite or manmade carbon products. It has no known cure. The risk of contracting the disease often depends on the length of time a person has been exposed to coal dust. Symptoms can often occur up to 15 years after the exposure period.

Since 1993, by law all Queensland coalminers undergo pre-employment chest X-rays, with another at least every five years. These X-rays must be sent to the mines department for review. Last year the department admitted that 150,000 X-rays were still awaiting database entry. Earlier this week it was reported that WorkCover Queensland data, obtained through right to information laws, revealed that four claims for the disease had been lodged between 2007 and 2012. That also coincided with a report that I think many of us saw on 7.30 on the ABC on Monday night.

A Queensland Health audit of public health records carried out earlier this year also found four probable and seven possible causes of black lung between 1995 and 2015. This is despite the fact that it was thought the disease had been eradicated in Queensland for decades—until a case was confirmed in May 2015. In July it was reported that another 18 suspected cases had been detected after X-rays were reviewed by health experts in the US.

We recognise that the minister has shown genuine concern for this issue and made several public statements and taken steps to address concerns that have been raised. We know that when unions are protesting against the actions of this government there are seriously underlying concerns that need to be addressed, and we have seen several protests outside parliament in relation to this important issue. There seems to be a blame game happening now between the industry and government departments as to what happened, why it happened and whose fault it was.

The number of media reports and the varied nature of the issues that have been raised have galvanised our belief that the best way to get to the bottom of what happened and ensure it does not happen again is through a commission of inquiry—a commission of inquiry under the Commissions of Inquiry Act, sometimes called a royal commission, but, not for some time now, a commission of inquiry properly constituted with a judicial officer with all the powers necessary to call witnesses and examine evidence. A commission of inquiry with hearings and evidence all being presented in a public forum, with media scrutiny and attention, seems to be the best way to address this serious issue and reassure the workers, their families and the industry that all relevant matters have been considered as part of the review as to the re-emergence of black lung in Queensland.

In 2004 a judicial inquiry was established by the New South Wales government to ensure that the victims of the James Hardie asbestosis and mesothelioma claims were suitably looked after, and that brought issues around asbestos related diseases to the fore. In 1911 there was a royal commission into working conditions in goldmines in Australia. It revealed widespread lung disease. As a result of the royal commission, ventilation laws were introduced.

While commissions of inquiry often determine what went wrong and why, the uncertainty that has been created over the past 12 months, with media speculation about half-truths and rumours, severely undermines the ability of current miners and former coalminers to have confidence that their health is at the forefront of consideration of government and industry.

How can the government take billions of dollars in royalties with one hand and not expend a couple of million dollars to get to the bottom of what has happened and ensure it never happens again? That is why the House should support this motion and the government should establish a commission of inquiry within 30 days. We owe it to the workers—both the ones who are currently working in the mining industry and the ones who have had a long mining career—to get to the bottom of the issues that have been identified and reported. I urge all members to support the motion before the House and the government to act.