




Speech By
Lachlan Millar

MEMBER FOR GREGORY

Record of Proceedings, 23 August 2017

WORKERS' COMPENSATION AND REHABILITATION (COAL WORKERS' PNEUMOCONIOSIS) AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr MILLAR** (Gregory—LNP) (9.31 pm): It gives me great pleasure to talk on the Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation (Coal Workers' Pneumoconiosis) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. The coal industry is a significant economic contributor in the seat of Gregory that I represent and the region. The coal workers and the people who work in the coal industry play a significant part in our community. They not only work in an industry which is a wealth creator for our region—a lot of GST and a lot of royalties go to the state government—but play a significant part in our community and our towns, such as Emerald, Tieri, Clermont, Capella, Blackwater, Middlemount, Dysart, Moranbah and the list goes on of towns in the Central Highlands.

It gives me great pleasure to talk on this piece of legislation. It gives me a sense of pride that in this House where we meet as lawmakers we are agreeing on something that is so important to many people across Queensland, especially the coal workers. All members in parliament can agree on this legislation in a bipartisan manner because it is so important. This is critical legislation. I say to the minister that this is probably one of the most important pieces of legislation she will have carriage of in this term because it means so much to so many people.

I would like to pay tribute tonight to the members for Burdekin, Mirani, Callide and Whitsunday. Like me, as the member for Gregory, they have a significant investment and a significant interest in coalmining. I acknowledge the member for Mirani as a coalminer. I listened to his speech and he mentioned working underground. I had the fortunate experience of being underground for only three hours down at the shaver. I can only imagine how hard and how confined that space is. This legislation is incredibly important.

Like many members in this House, I think we need to make sure we get this right. I would also like to pay tribute to the member for Bundamba and the member for Southern Downs who were on the committee that looked at pneumoconiosis in a more general sense. I had the privilege of being on that committee when I filled in for the member for Whitsunday when he was not available. I had the opportunity to be a part of that committee when they were on the Central Highlands. It opened my eyes to the significance of this legislation and other legislation that will deal with the disease.

I have had the fortunate opportunity, although it was sad, to meet someone with pneumoconiosis. This man who had been diagnosed with pneumoconiosis came into my office and he had no-one to reach out to, apart from his family, to know where to go, to know what to do, to know what opportunities or assistance he could get. I thank the member for Mirani who assisted me when I rang him to ask him for advice on the best way to deal with this. We were able to point this person in the right direction and help him through something that he and his family were struggling with emotionally.

I wondered then what it would be like to know that you have a disease but you are not quite sure how it is going to end. Well, you probably do know how it is going to end, and it is going to end in pain and sadness not only for him but also for his wife, his children and his grandchildren. His wife would be

there and be supportive for him, his children would be frustrated and hurt, and his grandchildren would probably be confused and not know what is happening to their grandad. I had the opportunity to meet with him and assist him to make sure he was on the right path to get the assistance he needed.

Many miners in the electorate of Gregory go to work in the mining industry and play a significant role in the economic contribution to our state and to our communities. We are talking about people who not only work in the mine but also coach the under 14 rugby league team and are involved in Rotary, the local tennis club and other local community groups that make our communities so great. When they do go to work, yes, they work in a high-risk industry but their high risk is more about moving machinery and more visible risks—not pneumoconiosis. This is a frightening disease that we have to deal with.

When I was first elected as the member for Gregory in 2015, pneumoconiosis was starting to become an issue in seats such as Gregory. I was dealing with this with not much depth of knowledge about the disease and what could be done, but, with the assistance of people from both sides of the House, we were able to find a resolution for some of these people to make sure they are on the right path. I thank everybody for that.

As I mentioned before, I have been underground myself and right down at the shaver. I can understand how this is an issue right now because of the amount of dust and the confined space they operate in. We need to make sure we have the right procedures and the right legislation in place so that these workers can go to work in a safe environment. We also need to make sure our open-cut miners work in a safe environment. I was on an open-cut mine only last week and I can see how that can be an issue too when you are dealing with such small particles in the coal industry.

It is important that we understand that this will affect people who have been in the industry for a long time as well as people who are new to the industry or have only been in the industry for the last decade and a half. I will always remember when I was on the committee with the member for Bundamba and the member for Southern Downs in Emerald and two young miners from Tieri, Lachlan and Mitch, addressed the committee. They were concerned about their future. They knew they needed to get X-rays so they could clear themselves and get back on site. Their fear was not so much for themselves; their fear was not being able to provide for their families. Lachlan and Mitch were young and newly married. I remember Lachlan as a young father who was worried about how he could take care of his wife and his kids if he got pneumoconiosis in the future. I certainly recognise that.

What concerns me too is that it has taken so long for this terrible disease to be picked up. It was not until 2004 that the first indications were there and then again in 2006. It was nine years after that when the department was able to at least start to recognise it. We certainly need to do better in Queensland to make sure we protect our coal workers. I am very pleased that the committee has agreed to pass the bill. One of the committee's recommendations is that the minister update the House on the progress to date in establishing and implementing an Australian B reader program. I think that is incredibly important. We need to make sure we have the diagnostic services and equipment here in Australia, here in Queensland. If we have that, we can read someone's diagnostic chart or X-ray and quickly make sure that, if they do have the disease, they are put on a program so they can continue to live a reasonable life.

I do note that the minister will provide clarity around the application of the common law 'once and for all' rule to sufferers of dust related diseases who have received compensation under common law where the disease progresses or the sufferer develops a new disease. The proposed amendments will provide clarity on who bears responsibility for the medical examination costs of miners who demonstrate six months of exposure to coaldust at more than one worksite in Queensland and will ensure reasonable travel costs incurred to attend medical examinations are not borne by the coal worker. I certainly agree with that.

The bill will provide access for coal workers with any concerns about coal workers' pneumoconiosis or a coalmine dust lung disease to a medical examination through the workers compensation scheme. Finally, the bill will introduce a medical examination for retired or former coal workers who are concerned that they may have CWP or coalmine dust lung disease. It will introduce an additional lump sum compensation entitlement for workers with pneumoconiosis who experience disease progression and will ensure that they can reopen their claim—this is important—and access further benefits under the workers compensation scheme.

This issue is dear to me, coming from the seat of Gregory and having friends and family in the coal industry. I trust this legislation does what it intends to do and that coal workers who, unfortunately, contract this disease are looked after both in terms of compensation arrangements and that the process is not too onerous on them.

(Time expired)