




Speech By
Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Record of Proceedings, 10 March 2021

MOTION

Australian Building and Construction Commission

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (5.36 pm): I need to declare that I am a registered builder in the state of Queensland under the QBCC Act. We in the industry know that a fair and balanced workplace relations system is the foundation of a strong economy and higher living standards for all Queenslanders. We know that the key to a better workplace lies in workplace relations policies that support job creation, business growth and the rule of law. Workplace unions do have a role to play. I support the motion tonight to not abolish the Australian Building and Construction Commission, ABCC, because we know that Labor's plan will let militant unions back off the leash.

The Morrison government, through recalibrating workplace laws to support the construction sector, has created nearly 1.5 million jobs and reduced the number of days lost to industrial action by 40 per cent. After the next federal election will not be the time to change direction. Now is not the time to turn the clock back to the 1970s and put Queensland building sites on strike. We need to stay the course to create more jobs—now more than ever—including jobs for young Queenslanders, support more businesses to start and grow, and uphold the rule of law in workplaces.

Anthony Albanese and Labor must explain why he wants lawlessness and thuggery to once again flourish on Australian building sites under his plan to abolish this independent construction industry watchdog. I note Queensland Labor have backed their federal colleagues' proposals to scrap this watchdog, doing exactly what, I believe, the unions have told them to do, but there are no alternatives being proposed and the industry has warned that the sector being exposed to thuggery and lawlessness will undermine our state's recovery.

Instead of the politicisation of the issue being played out, let's look at the achievements of the federal Morrison government to ensure productive and fair workplaces: re-establishing the ABCC to ensure small contractors and subbies can access our third largest industry without fear of intimidation, bullying and unaffordable cost imposts; abolishing the never-ending award review process that created uncertainty while sapping a disproportionate amount of time and money from small business; ensuring union bosses are held to the same standards as company directors by establishing the Registered Organisations Commission; and ending the 'strike first, talk later' approach to industrial relations, instead requiring that protected industrial action can only be taken once negotiations on enterprise bargaining have begun.

Labor wants to scrap the ABCC and the ROC—the Registered Organisations Commission—legalise industry-wide strikes for the first time ever, allow unions to veto free trade agreements and allow politicians to set minimum pay rates. They want to give union bosses the upper hand in workplace negotiations by banning employers from terminating expired enterprise agreements and forcing employers into compulsory arbitration. We know from history that these extreme policy platforms would stifle business, risk jobs and cause disruption across Queensland.

I think it is important to acknowledge that the state and federal governments can work together in the construction sector. They all agreed to implement the recommendations of the Shergold Weir report by February this year. In March 2019 the Building Ministers' Forum published a plan responding to the recommendations of the building confidence report. The plan sets out reforms both planned and underway in each jurisdiction. Along with re-establishing the ABCC, the coalition introduced a new function for the Federal Safety Commissioner. We have heard a lot about safety. It was great that the federal government wanted to audit compliance with the National Construction Code. The construction code started to deal with other issues.

One of the other things the ABCC does is makes sure subcontractors get paid on time for work done. It is fundamental to all businesses and subcontractors who make up our construction industry, particularly those working on federal government projects, that they have security of payments.

There are also the issues around nonconforming building products. All these things are going to be thrown out if we continue with the ideologically agenda of getting rid of the ABCC. The National Construction Code has always restricted the use of combustible cladding on high-rise buildings above three storeys. Again, this a collaborative approach with the states that ministers on the other side have signed up to. State ministers agreed in October 2017 to use their powers to prohibit the inappropriate use of these products on buildings. The state government has gone on with more of that work.

How can Labor claim to be on the side of workers when it wants to abolish an agency that stands up for their rights and promotes lawful and respectful behaviour in the workplace. When we reflect on the amount of money that is going into Labor coffers during elections there are a lot of questions about what is happening, particularly when they ban donations from property developers but continue to accept donations from militant unions. Most people on the other side have a lot of questions to answer.