



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SERVICES**  
**LEGISLATION AMENDMENT**  
**(DISABILITY REFORM) BILL 2002**

**Second Reading**

**SPEECH**

**Thursday, 30 May 2002**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Katter, Bob, MP

**Source** House  
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**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Mr KATTER** (Kennedy) (12.58 pm)—I do not wish to canvass all the very excellent arguments put up by the previous speaker, the member for Calare, and a number of other speakers as well. A very comprehensive view of the bill was given by the previous speaker and I think everyone would be well advised to take cognisance of that speech. Having said that, some say we are putting pressure on people to force them into the work force.

Most certainly, I am no bleeding heart, and I get an enormous number of employers coming to me complaining that they cannot get workers. I carry around with me wherever I go an excellent document containing a full rundown on what the real unemployment figures were about six years ago—although it must have been earlier than that because the ALP was in government at the time. The person who produced that document was Dr Kemp, who later became the minister for employment. Dr Kemp says that the real unemployment figures were about double what they were being quoted at. Larry Anthony says that the real number of people who cannot get jobs and who are on benefits may be as high as two million, the three editors of the three biggest national dailies all say that the unemployment figures are twice what it is claimed they are, and the government has admitted in the budget that the real unemployment figures are dramatically higher than they appear.

I do not have the figures with me, and I must apologise to the House for that, so I am travelling by memory here. From memory, over the last seven or eight years there has been an increase in the number of people on disability and similar pensions of 376,000. The current government claims that they have reduced unemployment by around 400,000. So all that has happened is that the reduced unemployment figure represents the 376,000 increase in the number of people on disability and related pensions. I must admit, I am leaning heavily upon the work done by Dr Kemp in this area. I can provide for any member of the House the references for those three landmark articles by the economics editors of the three major dailies in Australia.

If the real unemployment figure is six per cent, then Mr Larry Anthony, the minister, must be a liar, Dr Kemp must be a liar, and the three leading economics commentators from the three major newspapers in Australia are also in error. Dr Quiggan and Dr Langmore, in their excellent book *Work for all*, say that the real unemployment figure for Australia—they were the ones who first led me to look at the disability pensions issue—is not around 10 per cent, but 17 to 19 per cent. It is fully documented in their book. The result of the book was that Dr Langmore lost his seat in parliament. It was an ALP government at the time, and he was an ALP spokesman of some considerable note, so he was sacked from this place. The other result was that Dr Quiggan was the only economist in Australian history ever to receive the Academy of Science prize. He went on to gain very distinguished acceptance by the Australian community for the wonderful work that he did.

The point I am coming to, which is so relevant to this bill, is that we cannot force the unemployed to take jobs because the jobs simply do not exist. The only time I ever got really badly bashed up in a public debate—with all due respect to you, Mr Deputy Speaker—was against a spokesman for the Waterside Workers Federation. I was arguing that there were a lot of people on the dole who should not be on the dole; they were just being lazy and naughty and they should have some pressure put upon them to go out and do a decent day's work. He shot me to pieces by saying, 'Hey listen, they are not bludgers because six years ago they were all working.' Six years ago then was 1972, and in 1972 there was two per cent unemployment in this country. I make no apologies to anyone for saying the reason for that was the determination of one person, John McEwen. Again and again he said that the major responsibility of government was to provide work for its people. In a very famous letter written by Ted Theodore to John Curtin he wrote:

The major job of government is to provide work, meaningful work, for its people.

So two of the greatest men in Australian political history have used exactly the same expression. The history books record both of them as very great men.

Instead of concentrating on putting stick upon people who are hiding out in the disability rolls, if we provided them with a carrot of encouragement, like a job, we would not have to resort to this sort of legislation. I cannot

say that as confidently as I would like because I think that some pressure may have to be applied at this stage. That is not a very pleasant thing to have to say, but it may well be the case.

I present one case. A person in my electorate who has a government type job and responsibility for employing a lot of people has the disability people leaning on him. This is a delivery service; they deliver parcels and that sort of thing. He has a very grave disability which does not enable him to be as mobile as he would like to be. It is enormously inappropriate that this person be forced into this sort of job. It is even more extraordinary that an employer is being pressured to put such persons into this job. In this age of litigation, there would seem to be great exposure on the part of all parties concerned. It is the sort of case that arises when you start to put immense pressure upon people. We then start to run into some ugly scenarios out in the real world. I am worried that this is going to occur here. It is hard to judge this legislation without a more detailed look at how it would work itself out on the ground administratively.

The point that I wish to make to the House is that the real unemployment levels in this country are horrifically high compared with any other period in our history, with the possible exception of the Great Depression of the 1930s and the Depression of the 1890s. Excluding those two periods, the unemployment level is enormously and disgracefully high. The unemployment rate has fallen, and the current government deserves credit for having brought it back, but unemployment is still at a level which is totally unacceptable to the Australian community.

In speeches of this nature, I always make reference in the House to the exceptional work done by the federal department of health. They graphed the rise in suicides amongst young men in this country for 30 years, from 1966 to 1996. Then they graphed the rise in unemployment in the same cohort of the population. It is really eerie: both graphs are almost identical. Clearly, one is the product of the other; one is the cause and the other is the effect. There cannot be a more heartfelt cry from the people of Australia than that of our young men saying, 'The society you have created for us is so ugly that we are going to leave it completely, in the most definitive of manners.' There are more people saying that in Australia than in any other country on earth. We, as the people that run Australia, have to ask ourselves what we can do to overcome those things. I deeply regret to say that, if the government is serious about putting very real pressure on a lot of these people—not studios and well thought out pressure but real, across-the-board, insensitive pressure—then there is no doubt that there will be an increase in suicides and other stress related, ugly occurrences throughout our society today.

I cry out all the time in this place that in my electorate I sit upon a treasure-trove of resources. I say without apology to anyone that the Gulf country and its periphery can support a population of 60 million people. We have six times more water than the Murray-Darling, which supports a population of 20 million people. We have beautiful, rich, black topsoil that runs for 1,200 kilometres, 600 kilometres wide, and our husbandry is so awful as a nation that it is being torn to pieces with natural erosion on one side and introduced species, such as the terrible prickly acacia tree, on the other side. So there is work out there for people; there is, as our national anthem says, 'wealth for toil'. But there is no wealth for toil in Australia: all of our natural resources are being frozen by the government. Under national competition policy, we cannot build a port, we cannot build a bridge, we cannot build a road, we cannot put electricity on for people that have not got electricity—in fact, there is hardly a single thing that has ever been done in this country that can be done today. We are prevented from doing this. So instead of looking at using the stick, I would plead with the government to look at using the carrot.

Debate (on motion by **Mr Ross Cameron**) adjourned.