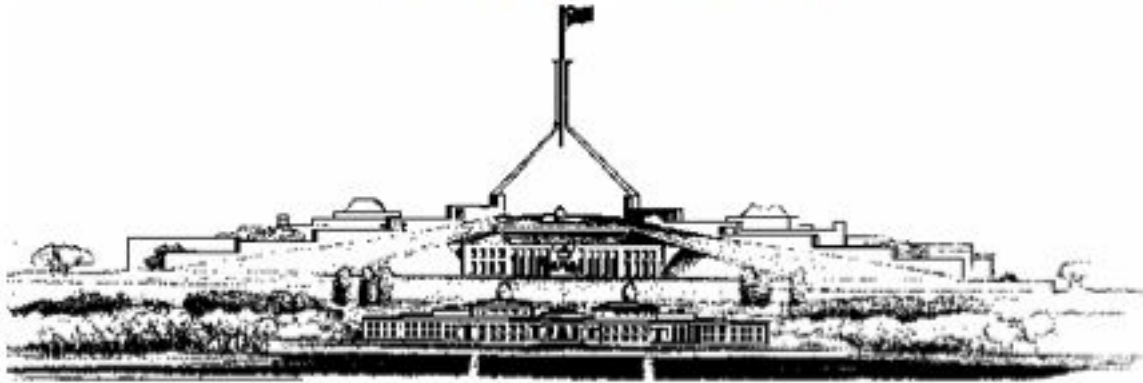




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

**OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY
(COMMONWEALTH EMPLOYMENT)
AMENDMENT (EMPLOYEE INVOLVEMENT
AND COMPLIANCE) BILL 2002**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Monday, 29 March 2004

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date Monday, 29 March 2004
Page 27493
Questioner
Speaker Katter, Bob, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Mr KATTER (Kennedy) (8.12 pm)—I do not wish to speak at any great length this evening, as I think the issues have been very well canvassed in this debate, but I would be remiss in my duty if I did not bring to the attention of the House my very strong support for the position taken by the opposition on this bill. It amazes me that the coalition parties and their members have an abysmal lack of understanding of how the world works—and of how it works if you are an employee and a member of the employee class. There is sometimes unbalanced hatred of unions, and I am not saying that there were not great excesses in trade unionism in Australia during the seventies and eighties. I came into this place having been a member of a government that had a very brutal confrontation in the electricity industry. I do not want to canvass that tonight, but suffice it to say that three people died because people refused to turn on the lights, and that left that government with little alternative but to go down the pathway that we ultimately went down.

But, returning to the Occupational Health and Safety (Commonwealth Employment) Amendment (Employee Involvement and Compliance) Bill 2002, it is not a good idea to remove the trade union movement, trade union members and trade union representation from the area of occupational health and safety. I would be the first to admit that there has been great irresponsibility by union people in the past, but to eliminate trade unions from this area is not a good idea.

I cannot remember the exact figures, but in the nineties in Australia there was a doubling or a trebling of the number of deaths that occurred in mining, and it was the subject of a special inquiry—which was the unanimous decision, I might add, of the interparty committee on rural matters. I think the parliamentary secretary at the table, the member for McEwen, may have been the chair of that committee. I was surprised at the unanimity of opinion, and it was to the credit of all of the people on that committee, the coalition as well as the Labor members, that there was a unanimous decision.

A huge increase in the number of deaths and serious accidents occurred in mining. There is no doubt in the minds of anyone on that committee that fly-in, fly-out mining operations played a very real part in the reason for that increase in the number of deaths. I do not want to canvass why that was the case this evening. The second factor was that mining companies became the subject of stock market gains during that period, particularly during the eighties, and the only thing that people in charge of mining companies knew how to mine was gold out of the pockets of fund managers in Sydney and Melbourne. That is the only thing they knew about mining. But the most important factor of all was the elimination of trade union representation throughout the mining industry.

I was supportive of action that was taken in Mount Isa. Again, I do not want to canvass that tonight, but it is very important for the government to understand the consequences of eliminating the trade unions. I worked as a labourer at Mount Isa Mines and we did a number of jobs there that were highly dangerous. One such job involved going into the bin for the lead dust. When you went in that bin, you had to wear a belt around you, but I twice went in without the belt and I was told by one of my work mates never to do that again. He said that the reason was that, when you are putting the air pipe down to get the hopper to work properly, it can go in a rush and you would go straight down through the hopper and be buried in lead dust. In another machine, there was a big rotating arm to break up lumps of lead dust. Unfortunately, in the days before the safety tickets on the stop and go buttons, someone pressed the button when a bloke was inside and he met a very cruel death. In fact I took his job. From then on, there was a double tag system for safety. If you come on shift and there are safety tags on machinery and you do not know why the machinery is not working and you are holding up production in the smelter—as occurred on at least two occasions to my memory when I came on shift—then something needs to be done.

If these accidents occurred and, because there was no union, you complained to your employer, then in the real world you would get a reputation for being a complainer and a troublemaker. When you get that reputation, you will not hold your job. It is not right that employees should be cast in that role. It is right that you should be able to approach your union, who are not employees of the mine, who can then put the case on your behalf. I have got to say to the government that it is naive beyond belief if it thinks individuals can bring attention to a

problem through an EBA and that they will be game to take legal action. If you lost your job, say, at Mount Isa Mines—or Xstrata as it now is—and you tried to pick up another job in the mining industry, they would want to know why you left your last employment and you can rest assured that they would check up why you left. If your last employer advised them that you had differences of opinion over safety issues then you would not get a job in the mining industry. That is the real world. That is how the real world works.

That is why unions are necessary. Whatever the shortcomings of unions—and I could most certainly give some very good speeches about the shortcomings of unions and how I as a worker have been sold out and how my fellow workmen were sold out—you cannot throw the baby out with the bathwater. A system where you have to go personally to your boss to make a complaint will never work. You must have an official body. Those people who think we can do without an official body are very stupid and they will pay the consequences of that sort of stupidity in the long term.

There are some good aspects of this legislation and they were canvassed earlier in the debate, but one of the aspects which I am most certainly very worried about and which I would certainly oppose is the effort to eliminate trade unionism. I hold no candle for trade unions—they have worked very hard against me in election campaigns—but I must say that we absolutely need those unions for safety reasons.

The real founder of the Labor movement in Australia undoubtedly was Theodore. Theodore's precipitation into the field of politics came about because as a boy of 16 he was nearly killed when he went down a mine. He told the leading hand, 'If I go down there, I could get killed.' All of the laddering collapsed and he nearly did get killed. Some six or seven years later at Chillagoe in North Queensland, exactly the same incident occurred, only in this case two people were killed and he again was nearly killed. He then said, 'We need a union. You simply cannot mine without a union.' The rest of his days were spent forming the AWU and then a political wing of the AWU, called the ALP, and they ruled Queensland because of the wonderful things that wonderful man initiated.

I want to quote a couple of figures. One in 30 miners died of miner's phthisis—and no-one was doing anything about that—and sometimes one in 10 people at a mine would die of mining accidents. It is an intrinsically dangerous game. You will always have a higher death rate in mining than in other fields. None of us who go down mines are wimps, and you do not want to go down mines if you are a wimp. Recently, there were two deaths in one of our mines in Charters Towers. Even though I knew the management there well, I undertook to talk to the workers in the mine and to go over in detail—being an ex-miner myself—how those accidents occurred. There is no doubt in my mind that the people who managed that mine were not culpable, and not a single worker thought that either. When the state government mines inspector closed the mine for five days, the union called an immediate meeting and demanded that the mine be reopened.

While there are those that assume that trade unionists are stupid people who want to kill the goose that laid the golden egg—and undoubtedly there are times when some union officials do act that way—on the whole that is not my experience. I would very strongly urge the government to reconsider the inherent moves in this legislation that eliminate the trade unionists from the occupational health and safety aspects.