



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

**EMPLOYMENT AND WORKPLACE
RELATIONS AMENDMENT BILL 2008**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Thursday, 12 February 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Gillard, Julia, MP

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Ms GILLARD (Lalor—Deputy Prime Minister) (3.14 pm)—I rise to sum up the debate on the Employment and Workplace Relations Amendment Bill 2008. I thank all members who have participated in this debate. I know that debate has ranged far and wide, and I think the contribution by the member who spoke before me indicated that this has been viewed as a wide-ranging debate—and also a debate in which people have indicated their concerns about people who are injured at work and our responsibility as a nation to do what we can to reduce injury rates, to reduce the number of Australians who die at work and to ensure that people who are injured at work are treated properly.

As was mentioned by my colleague the Minister for Employment Participation when this bill was introduced, it is essential that there are strong protections and safeguards in place for working Australians. Absolutely core to the beliefs of the Rudd Labor government are that we need to maximise the opportunity for Australians to get work. When Australians are in work we want them to have a decent safety net at work, which is why we introduced the Fair Work Bill. Of course, we also want them to be safe at work. On the question of maximising the number of work opportunities for Australians, the Rudd Labor government are committed to our Nation Building and Jobs Plan to support employment in our nation in view of the impacts of the global financial crisis.

I note that earlier today the labour force statistics for January were released. The ABS labour force data indicates that the global recession caused by the global financial crisis is bearing down on the Australian economy, and that once again reinforces the urgent need for the government's Nation Building and Jobs Plan. The data today from the ABS indicates that the unemployment rate has increased from 4.5 per cent to 4.8 per cent in the month of January. When we drill down further into the figures for the increase in the unemployment rate for January, we see that full-time employment increased over the month by 33,700 but part-time employment fell by 32,600. At the same time, the number of people looking for work in seasonally adjusted terms increased during the month by 36,800, pushing the unemployment rate higher. What these figures indicate is an increase in the unemployment rate from 4.5 per cent to 4.8 per cent, with that pattern of change in the number of full-time jobs, part-time jobs and the high number of people seeking work. We believe that these figures underscore the importance of the passage of our Nation Building and Jobs Plan so that we can support employment for Australians during these difficult days following the global financial crisis and the global recession, which has moved through so many developed economies in the world and is now bearing down on our own economy.

Apart from maximising the number of opportunities for Australians to work, the government is committed to Australians having decent working conditions. That is what our Fair Work Bill was about. We are absolutely committed to safety at work. I note that the number of Australians who died at work is declining, but that is of little comfort to the families who have lost a loved one. Obviously the loss of even one person at work is a tragedy for the family involved. This bill, which members have spoken to and made contributions on, increases the amount of death benefits payable under the Australian government's workers compensation scheme. One-off lump sum death benefits will increase from \$225,594 to \$400,000 and weekly periodic payments for dependent children will increase from \$75.10 to \$110. Both payments will be indexed to the wage-price index, issued by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The increases will bring death benefits more closely into line with those provided under state workers compensation schemes. Obviously we want there to be parity and similarity in those benefits. This will make it fairer for the families of employees, particularly for those whose employers have joined Comcare from state schemes.

I think members of parliament are probably aware that, particularly under the former government, we did see a migration of a number of large companies from state based compensation schemes into Comcare. That is something that this government entered into a moratorium about, and we are continuing to consider that matter. Obviously when people have moved from state based schemes into Comcare the question of the benefit arrangements as they line up between those state based schemes and Comcare is very important. This bill increases benefits so that there is greater parity between state based schemes and the Comcare scheme that those people have moved into.

In bringing this bill to the parliament we are clearly acknowledging that there is nothing that can be done to bring back a loved one who has died at work. But what we do have an obligation to do—the least that we can do—is to try to deliver some greater financial certainty to those families who have faced the loss of a loved one at work. This week, as people have spoken to this bill they have shown a great deal of bipartisan concern for safety at work, and I thank them for that. In that spirit, I commend this bill to the House.

Question agreed to.

Bill read a second time.

Message from the Governor-General recommending appropriation announced.