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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

BILLS

Fair Work Amendment Bill 2013

Second Reading

SPEECH

Thursday, 6 June 2013

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Katter, Bob, MP

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Mr KATTER (Kennedy) (13:01): The wonderful thing about my position is that when I stand up to speak on industrial matters I do so having been a member of the only government that has ever stood up to a union seriously when they were right over the fence. It was arguably one of the more brutal confrontations in recent Australian history. I have never resiled from the fact that I was a key player. The lights were turned off in major parts of Brisbane for over two weeks. That was the confrontation and from that point forward there was a backdown on excessive behaviour. There has been a backdown to a point now where unions in a lot of cases have become supine and, I might even say, in some cases grovelling. It is more important for them to achieve site coverage than it is for them to represent their workers. In those days one had to stand one's ground against excessive demands from the trade unions, but now I find myself, holding the same moderate position that I think I held then, having to go in the other direction.

The previous speaker said we were non competitive. Of course we are—you want a free trade deal with China. There is only one way to be competitive and that is to go down to Chinese wages. I do not doubt for a moment that the heartland of Liberal philosophy would have us go down to Chinese wages. I heard one of the biggest disasters in Australian history, Mr Paul Keating, tell us that we were going to move in a free and open economic society—that Australia would be the freest economy on earth—and he most certainly delivered on that promise. When I heard him say that, I asked myself: 'Is this person mad? Are we going to pay Chinese wages in Australia?' If you are going to have a free trade deal with China, you can close everything down in this country. Although I must admit I have not heard it recently, people in this House sometimes say we are going to be the food bowl of Asia. Those of us who come out of agricultural areas laugh. It is probably preferable that we laugh than cry. We will be net importers of food from Asia.

Let me be very specific. I have said this before in the House: if you draw a graph of the production of prawn and fish farming in China, it is almost a vertical graph. If you extrapolate on for 40 or 50 years, all of the world's protein will come from China. I cannot mention his name without his permission, but one of the biggest food wholesalers in Australia is about to get bumblebees, and I said, 'What do you need bumblebees for?' He said, 'Because you've got to stop the tomatoes coming in from China.' I do not want to go sideways on that issue again—I spoke about it before—but tomatoes will be coming in from China. The Tasmanians have told me that there are more apples and apple products coming in from China than we produce in Australia. Just wake up to yourselves, you stupid people. Your country, in three years time, will be a net importer of food thanks to the free market policies of the government and of the Liberal Party and their running dogs, as they used to be called, the National Party—the rubber stamps that come in here called the National Party.

Mr Chester: Try to be relevant once, Bob.

Mr KATTER: Well, I cannot think of one time that the National Party has taken a stand and confronted the Liberal Party in my 20 years here. Maybe there is an instance and my memory is playing tricks upon me, but I cannot remember what it was. But I do remember—unfortunately, for people like you who have been in here two minutes—the great Doug Anthony when he stood up and said, 'You will bring down the dollar or I will bring down the government.' That was a party which we will remember.

Mr Chester: Mr Deputy Speaker, on a point of order on relevance: we are debating the Fair Work Amendment Bill, and the member for Kennedy has not yet addressed the topic.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Cheeseman): The member for Kennedy is being rather wide ranging in his comments, and I do ask him if he could restrict his comments to the bill.

Mr KATTER: Thank you for the contribution, because I do want to get on to the bill. So I thank the interjector. But I was enjoying myself so much that I got sidetracked.

I was brought up as a little kid. You can read about it in my book, as I always say—\$36 at every good bookstore and a moderate bestseller, I am forced to add out of humility. As a little kid I was brought up in the Labor tradition. We were not labourers or employees. In fact, on my father's side we were always wealthy and, some of our critics would say, powerful people for many generations in Australia. I will not deny that or resile from that. But when one in 31 of the people in Charters Towers went down the mine and never came back up again, and one in 31 of those that went down the mines in Bendigo and Ballarat or the mines in New South Wales and Western Australia never came back up again, my great-grandad thought it was his duty as a decent citizen and a patriotic Australian to stop that from happening. To stop that from happening, we had to form the Labor Party. There was no alternative to that, and I very proudly recall—it is in all the history books—that my great-grandad gave 3,000 pounds, which is nearly \$1 million in today's money, to the strike fund in 1894. What we won at the turn of the last century was the right to arbitration. When we went on strike and tried to get decent pay, we were smashed to pieces. We were shot dead; there were three people shot dead at Dagworth Station over our fight to secure arbitration. Two weeks after that shoot-out at Dagworth Station—

Mr Chester interjecting—

Mr KATTER: Mr Deputy Speaker, I find it a little bit difficult, because the person at the front bench here is talking continuously, and fairly loudly as well. So could you shut him up, please?

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: I think they have paid some note to the member for Kennedy.

Mr KATTER: They introduced a concept called arbitration. As the previous leader of the Labor Party recalled, the first head of the arbitration court said that, when there is a contract of one, there is no contract. That is a profound concept. So we got arbitration and, funnily enough, from an enlightened Tory. The first arbitration in Australia came through George Reid as Premier of New South Wales. He introduced arbitration as law so that by right a worker had the right to arbitration if he wanted a fair go; he did not have to go on strike and go hungry, be shot dead, in some cases, or be thrown in jail for three years hard labour, as the entire executive of the AWU was in Queensland. He did not have to do those things. He could go in a civilised manner to an arbitration court and put his case. The employer could also go in a civilised manner to arbitration and put his case. We were a civilised society.

An incident that occurred last night in a Rugby League game indicated a not very pleasant side of not having a referee. The Liberal Party abolished arbitration in this country, so now we are playing football without a referee. That suited them because they represent the more powerful party, the powerful corporations, who are almost all foreign corporations. The Liberal Party represent the foreign corporations that own this country. All of our mining companies, all of our dairy factories, all of our sugar mills are foreign owned. Almost all of our factories—not that we have got many left—are foreign owned. So, representing their masters, the corporations, they abolished arbitration. We people of Australia might be dumb but we ain't that dumb, and a very good man lost his seat in parliament. Only twice in Australian history has a Prime Minister lost his seat in parliament, and on both occasions that Prime Minister abolished the arbitration system.

The sad news I have for the people of Australia is that you have not got it back. The ALP will lose office, and the historical record will read that they gave you back your arbitration commission but it is a catch-22: you cannot get into it. You can only get into it by way of strike, and even then it cannot arbitrate on the questions at issue. It can only arbitrate on the issue of the strike. I have spoken many times, thinking that they could, but I was incorrect. I thought that so long as you had a strike you could then get into the arbitration commission and secure arbitration. For the powerful unions that is all right. For that five per cent of the workforce that belong to powerful, good unions—some might say bad unions but I will say at least they are very aggressive on behalf of their membership—it is all right. But the other 95 per cent could go on strike as long as you like in some areas and no-one could care less. As far as the employer is concerned, you could stay out there until you go hungry.

That is why we need arbitration—so that it is fair to both sides. We are a civilised society; we do not play football without a referee. The fact is that the ALP did not give access to arbitration except in a very limited way by way of a strike. It was the only way you could get into the arbitration commission. They will be remembered in the history books. Every one of them that sat in this parliament voted for legislation along those lines.

Please God that we will be able, before this parliament dies, to put back into this parliament—we have urged everyone in the Labor Party to please give it back—our right to arbitration so that we do not have to go on strike to get into the arbitration commission and that when we do get in there they are able to make an award. Quite

frankly, an employer is supposed to try and make ends meet, and it is very difficult, because with the free-market regime imposed upon them they are forced to either close their doors completely or go down to Chinese wages. There is no in-between here!

I have two other minor matters which I need to address. Both are very difficult areas, but the area of bullying worries me greatly. Obviously, I have worked in mustering camps on many occasions in my life, and you do not say politely to the bloke, 'Shut that gate.' That is not how it works in a mustering camp, I can assure you. And in mining, if you are hitting a shaker with a sledgehammer—as was one of my many jobs at the mines when I worked there—you do not say, 'Get off that shaker because it is about to come back at you at 64 kilometres an hour.' I am afraid that the language that is used when you address someone in that situation could very well be construed as bullying. I think in a lot of cases it would be construed as bullying.

When I jumped into the big lead flue without a safety belt on, my foreman did not say: 'Oh, Bobby, that is naughty of you! Can you please get out and put the belt on?' That was not what happened. So I am worried about right of entry—very seriously worried about right of entry—because it is a de facto way of cutting out any trade union involvement at all. All we are saying is that the worker has a right to be represented, and then he has a right to a fair go: he goes to arbitration and, please God, we get reasonable outcomes from the arbitration commission. That was the system for 100 years in this country. The system in this country was that we paid more for our wages—not like the Liberal Party, who keep saying, 'Wages are too high; we've got to compete,' which is code for saying, 'We'll work for Chinese labour wages.' (*Time expired*)