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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Fair Work Amendment Bill 2014

Second Reading

SPEECH

Tuesday, 26 August 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Snowdon, Warren, MP

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Mr SNOWDON (Lingiari) (13:14): Can I start by just making some observations about the member for Canning's speech. It was all over the joint, which is typical. On the one hand, he said, 'I'm a supportive trade unionist, a former representative of my union, a workplace delegate.' On the other hand, he slagged them and slagged unions generally, not any specific union. In the latter part of his contribution, he said, 'Unions don't care about the welfare of their employees.' He said, 'Unions don't care if businesses are solvent or not.' What an asinine piece of nonsense. I do not know one union official, one union delegate or one union member around this country who is not concerned and not committed to looking after the welfare of the people in his or her workplace, or other workplaces—not one. Nor do I know any worker involved in working in a business who is not interested in making sure the business remains solvent so they can continue their job—not one.

Now we have this puerile attack on trade unionists in this country by the member for Canning, and no doubt from other members opposite, which has no substance. He started by talking about people having Solvol on their hands. Well, I think we have probably moved on to other products, but let me tell him that there are plenty of people on our side of this place who have worked hard all their lives and their families have worked hard all their lives. In my own case, I started working on a building site here in Canberra when I was 15. I was proudly associated with the then BWIU, the Building Workers Industrial Union. One of the people closest to me while I was working on that site, which was for a couple of months, was the delegate and union representative for the BWIU. What this person did for me was educate me about the workplace, about my responsibilities as a worker and about my responsibilities in terms of occupational health and safety. And this was not an unkind workplace.

Let me make it very clear that the sort of nonsense being spoken about by the member for Canning seeks pejoratively to accuse all unionists, effectively by dint of what he said, of somehow or another wanting to undermine their fellow workers in the workplace and of not being interested in the welfare or the future of their jobs because they do not care if the businesses they are working in are solvent or not.

I have had the experience of working on industrial sites and woodchip mills. I am probably the only member on this side of the chamber who has worked in a woodchip mill. There was another—there were two of us in the last parliament. Former minister Peter Garrett, unbeknownst to many in this place, also worked in a woodchip mill. I remember my experiences with this woodchip mill because it was a very unsafe working environment. I was just there as a labourer. What became clear was that we needed to make sure that the union that we were members of that we were associated with understood the nature of the work in that workplace, understood our responsibilities as workers and understood the need to make sure that that workplace remained safe not only for us but for other workers. It was very important to do that. We have this nonsense about the business of visiting people at the workplace, going onto building sites and into workplaces to talk to members, is all about signing up members. That may be a by-product of a visit on a workplace, but there are many workplaces around Australia today that could do with a visit by a trade unionist, by a union official, just to check up on the occupational health and safety issues in those workplaces.

Mr Ciobo interjecting—

Mr SNOWDON: You say that to those people who die on workplaces—in the building industry where people die. You have no interest in protecting their interests.

Mr Ciobo: Really, none?

Mr SNOWDON: Well, I hope you have some. I hope you have a humane element in your body. If you did, you would say to those workers who are working in those workplaces, 'We want to make sure the occupational health and safety issues which your union and our employers have identified are actually what they should be, and we want to get rid of those businesses which don't look after the interests of the working people of this country and have slack working practices.'

I was also on the executive of the Northern Territory Trades and Labor Council, which I was very proud to be. People in this country, even those members opposite, do not know this but most Australians, if not all working Australians, owe their working conditions in some form or another to the work of trade union officials and trade unions. Let us be very clear about it, unlike the members opposite: we on this side of the chamber do not say, because we are proud of the trade union movement and are members of trade unions, that we are going to walk away from the fact that those trade unions work extremely hard for the benefit of working Australians, that they look after the interests of working Australians and do so with an obligation on them by their members to make sure they look after them appropriately. That is the job of a trade union official and that is what they are bound to do.

This Fair Work Amendment Bill 2014 seeks to amend the Fair Work Act in response to the Fair Work Act review. The panel which undertook the review made 43 recommendations. Prior to the election, as with other promises made by this government, the coalition promised to implement the recommendations of the review without change. Surprise, surprise—this, as with so many other promises, has been broken. The government has gone beyond the panel's recommendations, despite promising not to, and the central recommendations are not being implemented without change. This bill, like so much of what this government does, is a poorly disguised vehicle for attacking the conditions of workers and the right of unions to represent them. Consequently, we oppose central elements of this legislation.

We know—and even those on the opposition would understand and recognise the truth of this statement—that the Howard government was thrown out largely because of its very, very poor industrial relations record and, of course, the legislation which it had the gall to pass through this chamber. It was a record of attacks against the rights and conditions of Australian workers. The then opposition leader said Work Choices was 'dead, buried and cremated'. In part, this bill is a resurrection of some of those dead principles. It seeks to undermine workers' rights to fair representation and fair treatment in the workplace.

This government has quickly established itself as a government with total disregard for Australian voters and for the promises that were made to them prior to the election. That is the guts of a lot of this. You must have honesty and integrity. I saw at a book launch this morning where the Prime Minister spoke about integrity and what we should be doing. What he should be doing is being honest with the Australian people. That is what he should be doing. And what he should be doing is apologising to the Australian people for those things he said before the election, the promises he made before the election, and the lies that have been told subsequently, and apologise to the Australian people for his and his government's behaviour. His and his government's behaviour not only in the context of this piece of legislation, where, as I said, promises remain broken, but also of course the pronouncements about no cuts to education, no new taxes, no cuts to health, no change to pensions, no change to the GST, and no cuts for the ABC or SBS. We all know what this Prime Minister should be doing. He should get up in this parliament and apologise to the Australian people for the lies that have been told.

Mr Craig Kelly: Point of order, Deputy Speaker. I would ask the honourable member to withdraw that word.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Vasta): I would ask the honourable member for Lingiari to withdraw.

Mr SNOWDON: Lies are able to be told. I did not attribute a particular person as telling a lie; I said 'lies were told'. Surely that cannot be unparliamentary.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: If you were not referring to the Prime Minister, then—

Mr SNOWDON: Surely that cannot be unparliamentary: 'Lies were told'. Let us be very clear about it: this parliament should see the Prime Minister apologise to the Australian people for what has happened in terms of the undertakings given prior to the election and what has happened subsequently.

Disregard for electors and for the truth clearly now spreads to industrial relations. The Prime Minister's promise to abide by the Fair Work review's recommendations when making changes to this industrial relations legislation has gone the way of his other promises. As the shadow minister has reminded us in his contribution to this bill:

It is now clear that the government could not be trusted to honour its most basic promise—namely, to implement recommendations from the 2012 Fair Work review without change. Instead, the government is putting down its own spin on Fair Work recommendations while trying to pass them off as a carbon copy of what the expert panel proposed.

Let us make it very clear: like in so much of what this government does, it has overstepped. Not only has it been dishonest but it has clearly overstepped. There is within this parliament the capacity for the government to seek to change the way it operates to make sure it does not overstep, that it does operate with honesty and integrity, and that it does not tolerate lies being told. It really has that capacity. Whilst we have these faux lectures from the Prime Minister about what we should as parliamentarians and what the community should be doing about our own honesty and integrity, he needs to demonstrate some in this place. He needs to demonstrate some of this place and he should do it as soon as possible.

We are not fools in this place and the Australian public are not fools. They know precisely what has been going on. Here is just another example. We know that, whilst there are some people in the broader community who might support aspects of this legislation, some believing it not going far enough, it is very clear that this bill, as described by the ACTU secretary:

... undermines a range of key rights at work and is an exercise in the Government ticking off the pre-election wish list of the mining industry.

If that is the case, that is clearly inappropriate and clearly another example of dishonesty and dishonest treatment.

I go back to the member for Canning. How could we not sit here—well, I was sitting in and therefore listened to him. I was confused, simply because he is a confusing fellow, but also because the message was so devoid of any reality about the rights of Australian working men and women and about the role of trade unions in this country. We on this side of the chamber are proud of the role of Australian trade unions in our history. We know, as we were reminded also very recently by a former Prime Minister, about the role the trade unions have played in the lives of every working Australian, whether or not they are a member of a trade union. We should applaud them for the work they have been doing and provide them with the capacity to continue their work in the future and make sure that they, like us—and you—have the responsibility of looking after the interests of Australian working people.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. BC Scott): Order! It being almost 1.30 pm, the debate is interrupted in accordance with standing order 43. The debate may be resumed at a later hour.