



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

BILLS

**Fair Work (Registered
Organisations) Amendment Bill 2012**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Monday, 25 June 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Katter, Bob, MP

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Mr KATTER (Kennedy) (16:55): I applaud some of the remarks that the previous speaker made. His endorsement might be in a fair bit of trouble as a result of some of the remarks he made, but I applaud him for them. However, he started talking about unionists having a responsibility to speak up and the fact that the amendments being moved by the Liberal Party will overcome that problem. We have the situation with the building workers union where there is a right to silence enjoyed by everyone everywhere in the world. I do not know of any jurisdictions, outside of one-party government countries, where you have no right to silence. I will not go into all the arguments about why you should have a right to silence; suffice it to say that every country in the world provides that right to silence.

I have not seen the amendments—I could be critical and say that I did not get the courtesy of receiving the amendments—so, not having seen them, all I can do is comment upon what the previous two speakers said. In the building workers union, if the police ask you a question and you refuse to answer it, they can jail you and jail you pretty well indefinitely at their discretion. We are on very dangerous ground when fundamental freedoms are taken off people. I do not want to go into all the issues around that building workers legislation. It was only under threat from the crossbenchers that the ALP moved to remove what were abominable discretionary powers that were given to these various authorities. There had not been a single problem in almost the last seven years and there was no justification. There may be justification for some oppressive legislation in the short term to fix a short-term problem, but I would think that you would never introduce that type of legislation without a sunset clause upon it. I find it very hard to envisage a situation where fundamental freedoms and rights are taken away to overcome a temporary problem that has arisen, however bad that problem might be.

Let me turn from generalities to the bill before the House, which is aimed at increasing the responsibilities upon trade union officials in the area of accountability. The unions have all agreed to it, but I suspect that a number of them have agreed to it because they are too scared to say they do not agree to it, because someone might start looking at them and thinking that they have something to hide.

I came into this place out of a terrible baptism, which was the Fitzgerald inquiry in Queensland, where we had some people at the heart of police corruption. I say with very great pride that we had the courage, with our eyes open, knowing the great dangers that we took, to try to go after that centre of corruption in the police force. Most certainly it was not Terry Lewis but, on the evidence, it would appear that he was playing a part in protecting these people.

In doing that, we unleashed a monster. Monsters have been unleashed with the Salem witch burnings and the McCarthy hearings in the United States. We can find a hundred examples: the Spanish Inquisition; the burning of books in Nazi Germany; Oliver Cromwell's regime in England. There are many examples of the psychological phenomenon of witch burning. We most certainly suffered that in Queensland, and it made me very conscious of the enormous injustices that are perpetrated—in a lot of cases, upon public officials such as politicians. The leading case is Brian Austin, a minister in Queensland who was effectively the first one to go to jail. Let everyone in this place listen to this with some fear and trembling. He was jailed because he took his government car to visit his kids who were at boarding school in Armidale. He spent three years in a cage, like an animal, because he did that.

Madam Acting Deputy Speaker Owens, you would be aware that almost every government official in Australia—and I do not just mean politicians—has a government motor car which will be used for private purposes today. Whether it is picking up the kids from school or picking up a loaf of bread on the way home, it falls within that definition. But when the old witch-hunt occurs watch out, because there is no such thing as justice here. I am just worried that the government may have acted somewhat excessively in this area—and I most certainly would not be cheering the opposition on in their attacks here.

Turning to the issue of collective bargaining in Australia, I had the very great honour of addressing two of the trade unions' annual general meetings. I think at least one of them knew of my book on the history of Australia from 1890 to 1910. In that book was a very fine tribute to trade unionism in this country. We had a situation a hundred years ago in which one in 31 of us who went down the mines never came back up again. They died a terrible death from miner's phthisis or, worse still, in many cases they were buried alive. And this was not confined to mining. Of the 2,000 men who worked digging the sewerage ditches in Sydney—they were working down eight or nine feet deep and there was no circulation of air—every single one who worked there for more than two years died of miner's phthisis.

And if you are looking for the reasons for the formation of the Labor Party in Australia, look no further than miner's phthisis. The first Labor head of government elected anywhere in the world was in Queensland—Anderson Dawson, from my own family's hometown of Charters Towers. We were in Charters Towers before there was a Charters Towers. Anderson Dawson was the member of parliament for Charters Towers and the first Labor premier elected anywhere in the world. He left parliament because he had contracted lung disease, miner's phthisis, whilst he was mining. Andrew Fisher, the second Labor Prime Minister of this country, also had to leave politics on account of miner's phthisis, and his father also died from miner's phthisis.

The black people who were employed in the mines in South Africa, even though they were very poorly treated, had legislation protecting them from miner's phthisis—damping-down legislation. When they were using machine drills, which came in the 1890s, they needed damping-down legislation. It was given by the white people of South Africa to protect the black people who worked down in the mines. In Wales the miners were treated even worse. They had a steel collar welded around their neck with a number on it and they were not allowed to leave their place of work, by law. They were very much in a slave-like activity. Ken Follett wrote a very good novel based upon the situation in Wales.

Even though those people were treated like dogs and slaves, they still had protection for damping down. But in this country we did not. We had to form a union. One of the leaders of that very great union, the AWU, is in here today—and very proudly, I would think. The union was formed to combat and overcome, mainly by Ted Theodore when he went down the mine for the second time in his life and saw his mates die. That was his fork in the road to Damascus. He formed a union and he took over the running of Queensland within seven years. The people were so grateful for what he did for them—and I pay tribute to trade unionism in this. It was not just what that great union leader did for the workers and the employees. He took the land off the landed gentry, who to a large degree were foreign corporations, and redistributed it to Queenslanders.

Probably half of the landowners in Queensland today, if they trace it back, got their original land from the redistribution policies of the Theodore government. They gave us the land so that we Australians could make a quid. And our farmers were given statutory marketing arrangements. Our dairy farmers were not told what they would be paid. They said, 'You 'll pay us this amount of money via an arbitrated price '—and similarly with the workers. When the dairy farmers lost that arbitrated price their price went from 59c a litre the day before deregulation to 42c a litre the day after. Every member of this place should reflect upon the fact that they belong to a political party that participated in what the very famous dean of the Faculty of Economics at the University of Queensland, the most distinguished of Australia's economics faculties, Ted Colson, said in addressing a meeting. He said the three great shames of this nation were the way that we treated the men who came home from Vietnam, the way we treated the first Australians and what we did to the dairy farmers of Australia through deregulation.

Without the trade union movement we would live in a deregulated marketplace. It is easy for the speaker before last to get up and say that the unions should not give money to the ALP. If they had not, we would have a deregulated labour market in this country. To the eternal shame of the Liberal Party in Queensland, the Premier of Queensland stood up two weeks before the election and said that there will be no fly-in miners from overseas. No, what he said was, 'I'm not in favour of fly-in mining from overseas.' That was two weeks before the election. Five weeks after the election he stood up and said, 'There will be fly-in mining from overseas in Queensland.' It was a very different party before the election and after the election.

But to see a Labor government here in Canberra give the green light to flying in foreign workers from overseas! Madam Deputy Speaker, your predecessor, Mr Slipper, removed a picture of Charlie McDonald, the first member for Kennedy and my predecessor. Every speech Charlie gave in this House in his early years in the parliament was against bringing in foreign workers from overseas to undermine pay rates, to undermine safety conditions, to work for nothing and to take jobs that should have come to the local worker.

That is the contribution being made by the trade union movement. Some of them have had the courage to speak out against flying in foreign workers. In Queensland 299,000 people are registered for full-time employment but cannot get a job, with 200,000 of those unable to get a job at all. And there is Gina Rinehart telling us that she has to fly in workers from overseas. As for the assurances provided to us by the federal government, they are not worth the paper they are written on. They should be ashamed of themselves for insulting the trade union movement of Australia with such absolute rubbish like, 'We'll make sure that there is no Australian available for that position.' There would not be a member in this place that has not driven a truck around the provisions of section 457. I most certainly have. So, if you can drive around section 457, you will most certainly be able to drive it around this— (*Time expired*)