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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

BILLS

**Fair Work Amendment
(Transfer of Business) Bill 2012**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Thursday, 1 November 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Katter, Bob, MP

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Mr KATTER (Kennedy) (11:38): The previous speaker on the Fair Work Amendment (Transfer of Business) Bill 2012 was talking about the Liberal Party, but you do not want to throw stones if you are in a glass house. His area is a railway area. I will give you the figures on the railways in Queensland. In 1979, there were 22,000 railwaymen employed in Queensland. When the Bjelke-Petersen government fell, there were 21,000 railwaymen employed in Queensland. In other words, there had been no diminution whatsoever, in spite of computerisation being introduced in those 10 years, when really 3,000 or 4,000 jobs became surplus to requirements. But still we did not sack anyone or put anyone off.

I say to the previous speaker: you want to be careful, because when we handed over government there were 21,000 employees in the railways; within seven years, under the Labor government, there were 12,000 employees in the railways. Those men had believed in the Labor Party and backed the Labor Party all of their lives. My old state electorate was very much a railway electorate. Every single person in my last state election that handed out how-to-vote cards for them was a railwayman or associated with the railways. I never held it against them. They were traditional Labor men. In fact, a lot of them I liked very much. But, of course, now no railwaymen hand out how-to-vote cards for the ALP.

In Queensland, on this issue, the Labor leader of Queensland was asked to leave the dais where she had pushed her way in. I thought I might sneak in there too, but they did not have me up there either. But they were not going to state that the ALP were on the side of the angels, because in Queensland they most certainly were not.

Now, in this place, they are on the side of the angels here. The minister is attempting to do something to help out in what is a callous and vicious situation in Queensland. The previous speaker's remarks about the people on my right are, unfortunately and sadly, very true. There can be no other reason why the Premier of Queensland would want to sack those people. You can get rid of people by a process of nonreplacement.

I had a department which was a First Australian—Aboriginal, if you like to use that word—department, and it was composed entirely of whitefellas. All the people employed were whitefellas, when their jobs were supposed to be looking after blackfellas. They called it the 'browning' of the department when, over a period of about 3½ years—I think these statistics are pretty right; you have to be careful when public servants hand you statistics!—almost all of that department became blackfella, not whitefella. But we did not sack anyone.

It was a decision cold-bloodedly taken by the cabinet. In the cabinet, Premier Bjelke-Petersen said, 'Bob, how long will it take if you go nonreplacement?' We had a big turnover. I said, 'In 3½ years, Premier, just about everyone should be replaced.' He said, 'How much extra will it cost?' I said, 'About \$7 million or \$8 million a year, but I've got a budget of about \$240 million, so it's not going to break the bank.' He said, 'Boys, we don't sack.' There were a couple of girls at the table, but he said, 'Boys, we don't sack.' And everyone said, 'No, we don't sack.'

It was the toughest and most brutal government. Everyone knows the history of the stand-up when the lights were turned off in Brisbane. We could be as tough and as brutal as any government in recent Australian history, and in fact in that case we were. We went much too far, as far as I was concerned, at the end, after the lights were turned on. I did not think it called for any action then—but, anyway, that is a story for another day.

We were a tough, brutal government, but we never sacked anyone. We thought it was a wrong thing to sack people. Our leader was a very, very Christian person, in the sense that he had been a preacher in his younger days. His father was a full-time preacher in the Lutheran Church, and Bjelke-Petersen had been a missionary up in North Queensland. We as a group of people did not believe that it was a civilised thing to do to go sacking people.

When you sack people, they lose their car. Mr Deputy Speaker, how would you like to lose your car, have it taken off and repossessed? How would you like to be kicked out of your house because you cannot afford the rental in that house anymore and have to look for social welfare housing? In 20 per cent of cases, you lose your

family. How would you like to lose your family, Mr Deputy Speaker? In two per cent of cases, you suicide. How would you like to suicide, Mr Deputy Speaker?

I mean, why did they do this? I cannot come up with any statement other than what the previous speaker said—that they are trying to prove they are tough. We never had to prove to anyone we were tough. Our backgrounds clearly indicated that we were tough. When you have to prove you are tough, there is something seriously wrong with you. And when you have to prove you are tough by breaking the hearts of 15,000 families in Queensland, there is a name for that and it sure ain't tough.

The Liberal and National parties think government is about cutting spending. They do not have very good intellects but really, you have to be pretty simplistic if you think that government is so simple that you simply cut spending. In the Great Depression, they advocated a cut in spending in this place. They are on record as criticising the government for spending. They got wise because they were kicked around the place by a lot of intelligent people in Australia. By the time they had taken three months of kicking, they modified their position and stopped criticising the government spending money and then said the government had spent the money the wrong way. That was not the original thrust; the original thrust was that the government should not be spending money when the collapse hit the whole of the world.

Of course you spend money. That is exactly what you do in a recession. That is exactly what you do in a depression. That is what Takahashi did in Japan. That is what Galbraith did in the United States, or Eccles. That is what John Maynard Keynes did in Great Britain and that is why every country on earth never had much of a depression except Australia. America did it very late in the piece and they had a terrible depression, but nowhere near as bad as Australia. Unfortunately, the conservative viewpoint was prevailing at the time and that was the outcome.

My son Robbie Katter took a different line from Shane Knuth and from me. He is quoted on the ABC Queensland news as saying that to have a massive cut in spending in a post-GFC environment—Mr Deputy Speaker, I know that talking in this place is a farce, but to have the three frontbenchers at the table all talking to each other and laughing I find a little bit over the fence. Would you mind giving them a little bit of a kick, please?

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Murphy): Let me assure you, Honourable Member for Kennedy, that I am listening to every word you are saying. I always find you an engaging speaker. I draw to the attention of the House that the static is impeding your address.

Mr KATTER: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. My son said, 'In a very fragile post-GFC environment to have a massive cut in government spending is very dangerous policy indeed. In fact, I would go so far as to say that it's extremely irresponsible policy.' Then he went on to say that those people who are out there cheering and saying, 'Beauty, we're getting rid of all these bludging public servants'—because a lot of the business class see public servants as bludgers—are exactly the same people who, in four months time, are going to be checking their cash registers and whingeing, crying and howling that they are in serious trouble and are going to want to leach the Queensland government. On this one, my son was wrong when he said four months because it was four weeks. I met with two of the biggest retailers in North Queensland and they said, 'Mate, he's driven us straight through the floor.' One of them is a rabid LNP supporter. He would die before he would vote for me or for any KAP people, but he was in terror. His figures have just collapsed.

We went to a motelier at one of the most successful motels in Northern Australia and also one of the biggest. Their figures are down a third. They just got a telephone call to cancel all government bookings for the next 12 months. The lady involved said, 'I didn't take much notice because they'll ring me up next week and say "Can you book four". They'll do it on a piecemeal basis. In the last two months, I doubt whether we had a single government booking.' I said, 'What would it normally be?' She said that 20 per cent to 30 per cent of all her available accommodation is taken by state government officials.

We have had the longest outage in Charters Towers history. I went away there to boarding school in 1959. So I am familiar with my family's home town. They went there before there was a Charters Towers. Since 1959, we have never had an outage like this. Maintenance has not been done in the electricity industry since before the sacking of 500 Ergon workers. So I leave it to your imagination how much maintenance is going to get done in the future, because these corporatised industries are being price gouged by the former ALP government and now by the current government.

We praise and thank Minister Shorten for what the government are doing today. I have discussed this with the minister because there is some worry on the part of some of my public servants that, if they have to be paid the same rate after this legislation comes in—'If you employ a public servant to continue to do that job, they have to be paid the same rate'—they will sack us and put someone in who can be paid less. The whole idea of going to contract work is that workers will be paid less. I would hate to think that the state government is doing this just to look after their crony rich friends. I am sure they are not doing that. The idea is that the price is going to go down because workers are going to be paid less. If they cannot pay workers less, they will get rid of those workers.

From lengthy discussions with Alex Scott—and we appreciate his time—and Ben Swan in Queensland from the AWU, and, particularly, the Together union's Belinda Johnson in North Queensland, they are not going to be able to sack, for example, all the laundry workers in the hospitals. They cannot just go in and sack all of them.

So, for the time being anyway, what the government is doing is going to be very helpful, and we appreciate the government's and the minister's involvement, and we back the initiative being taken by the government in this area. We would like the minister to keep an eye on the situation in Queensland and give any other assistance he could provide, until—well, clearly, if the government keeps going the way it is going, it will not be the government; please God, we will be. So I would like the ALP, the government of Australia, to be nice to us and listen to us. Any further assistance it can give to the people under attack in Queensland would be very much appreciated, and we thank very much the minister and the government for the initiative.