

House of Assembly - Thursday, 3 April 2008, Page 2532

WORKCOVER CORPORATION: MEMBER FOR MORIALTA

Mr GRIFFITHS (Goyder) (12:30): I move:

That this house condemns the member for Morialta for supporting the state government in cutting WorkCover entitlements, and for—

- (a) not taking any interest in the blow-out in WorkCover's unfunded liability since taking office;
- (b) not taking any interest in WorkCover's poor return to work results;
- (c) not informing the public until after the federal election that WorkCover entitlements to injured workers would be cut; and
- (d) not examining alternatives to cutting workers' benefits as part the WorkCover reform.

It will be interesting to see what occurs across the chamber during my contribution: we might have some different tactics on this. I say from the start that some might see this as a bit of a stunt, but it is not. We on this side who are speaking to their motion either today, or whenever they have the opportunity, believe that it is a serious matter—it truly is. We believe that all members of the government need to be held accountable, because each of them is part of a government which has delayed making a decision to do anything about WorkCover for six years. So, I—

Mr Kenyon interjecting:

Mr GRIFFITHS: Member for Newland, I quite confidently stand up here to talk about this fact because it is not good enough. WorkCover is a serious issue for every South Australian. Individual members of the government need to be held to account. We in opposition have continually asked the minister and the government questions about the unfunded liability. We know that it was \$56 million when the government took office in 2002; last June it was \$843 million; and now potentially could be around \$1 billion. Individual members of the government have to be held responsible. I will say that often during my contribution because you are all part of the decision to do nothing about this until now.

You have had ample opportunity to do so in the past. In the discussions that you have within your own caucus, you have had ample opportunity to stand up and to fight for the workers in your area, but we on this side of the house do not think that you have been doing that job properly. When we have asked questions of the minister, we have heard nothing of the member for Morialta—nothing at all. I try to reflect upon eye movements and facial expressions and all that sort of stuff from everyone on that side of the house. When we ask questions it is interesting to read the body language, but my observation—

Mr Pisoni interjecting:

Mr GRIFFITHS: The comments made demonstrate that they are disinterested. However, when I have looked across the chamber when responsible questions have been asked of the minister and the Premier on behalf of all South Australians about this matter, the reaction from government members has been that they do not seem to care. We on this side of the house do care because people who live in our electorates are affected by WorkCover. I know that all of us have been contacted by people in the community who are subject to WorkCover support and who are frustrated that they have not been given the support and the rehabilitation that they need to get back into the workforce.

The reason we are moving these individual motions is that we want each member of the house to be held accountable. I understand that the member for Morialta is a reasonable person, and I say that in all sincerity. She has offered a very flattering comment to my wife about me, so I think it is important that I do acknowledge that—

An honourable member interjecting:

Mr GRIFFITHS: She stood up—

Mr Pederick interjecting:

Mr GRIFFITHS: We all need that sometimes.

Mr Pederick: She didn't want to tell you to your face, though.

Mr GRIFFITHS: Probably easier to do it through the other option. I have heard the member for Morialta quite often talk with passion and commitment about things that have been important to her, and I respect that fact. However, on this matter about WorkCover, I have not seen that occur. That is why we have chosen to make people accountable and to move a motion about each member. The member for Morialta is committed to many things. She should be equally committed to WorkCover and the need to have reforms that would have ensured that workers' rights were upheld.

We conducted a search and I could not find any comment by the member for Morialta on WorkCover. She should be out there fighting for her constituents: it is important. All of us are elected to this place—all 47 members of the House of Assembly and 22 members of the Legislative Council—and are here to fight for our constituents. Every member has people living in their electorate who are dealing with WorkCover issues. I know that many people in my electorate have contacted me about WorkCover. I have written to the minister and to WorkCover and, each time I have written, my intention has been to ensure that the needs of those people and those families are met, because WorkCover claims affect more than one person, they affect the family unit.

We have tried to fight for the needs of those people to ensure that they are helped as quickly as possible. The constituents of the member for Morialta do not know what she thinks about this because she has not commented publicly. Members on that side, other than the member for Enfield, I believe, who yesterday chose to make a small contribution about the matter about which we cannot talk, have not spoken yet. We look forward to contributions from members on the government side, not only in relation to the motions that we are moving today but also in relation to the other matter about which I cannot talk and which is before the house.

It is obvious to me that the people in Morialta—the 30,000 or so fine people who live there and the 22,000 people who will vote at the next state election—want to know where their member stands on WorkCover—and they don't know that. That will be the basis of many of the contributions made by members on this side. The majority of members on this side of the house have spoken. We have told people what we think about the changes that the government is bringing in. Members on the government side have not yet said a word—and the honourable member's constituents want to know about it.

Return to work is the second point identified in the motion—and for me that is a key area. Again, I have not heard the member for Morialta speak about it. She is a compassionate person. I am sure she would want to ensure that the return-to-work options for her constituents injured in the workplace happen as best they can. But let us hear it: let us hear her stand up and say something about it. Why have we not heard anything at all over the last six years? The opportunity is here now. She can respond to my motion—and I hope the member for Morialta does respond—and let us hear what she thinks about return-to-work statistics as they relate to South Australians, especially the people of Morialta.

Return to work is the key area. That is where South Australia is poorly performing. We know that statistically South Australian return-to-work figures are the worst in the nation. It can only change through government initiatives. Why has it taken six months to create some changes?

The member for Morialta, in relation to paragraph (c) in the motion, must have known that the

announcement by the minister early last year to delay reforms to WorkCover by instigating another review—which subsequently has become known as the Clayton Walsh report—was a delaying tactic designed to ensure that Labor's federal candidates had the greatest chance possible of being successful on 24 November. I have mentioned previously that I think it is blatant political point scoring. We knew on this side of the house that the announcement by the minister was designed purely to help federal Labor and the Kevin 07 campaign. It has proven to be successful, but I think they have duped people.

Mr Pisoni: It's not principled.

Mr GRIFFITHS: It's not principled, as the member for Unley says. There was always an intention by the government to bring in changes. It knew that South Australians would be upset by these changes, so they deliberately delayed them. That is not what politics should be about. Politicians should say what they believe at the time, not delay it for political opportunism. Let us get people in here who want to talk about and do things as quickly as they can for the benefit of all South Australians.

The poor controls that exist over WorkCover are the responsibility of all Labor government MPs. I have absolutely no doubt about that. We are moving these motions because we want individual members of the government to be held accountable to their constituents about this. Let them stand up and talk about WorkCover. Let them express to their constituents what they think about WorkCover on a personal level, the deliberations they have had within caucus and the party room, and what changes they have tried to instigate—but they cannot do that.

We on this side of the house are quite lucky, because we represent a party which believes that members can express individual opinions—and that is the difference between the two parties. We can stand up and fight for issues that we believe are important. We can always reserve our right to make a comment different from the majority of our party members. Members on the government side cannot do that. They are blindly told, 'This is what will happen.' They are told by senior power brokers within their party that they have to vote a certain way. We on this side do not get that: we are able to express an opinion and debate matters for as long as we like, and we are able to stand up in this place with some pride and say what we think truly needs to happen.

Again, I say that the poor controls over WorkCover are the responsibility of all Labor MPs—and they have been for six years. It is this six-year period that frustrates people. The minister when asked a question about WorkCover constantly refers to the new board and the new CEO, and the fact that the unfunded liability is under control—or will be soon. With the benefit of time it has been proven that it is not under control. The new board has been there for five years and the new CEO has been there for five years. We have seen a blow-out of amazing proportions in the unfunded liability that must concern every South Australian. It has gone from a \$56 million to a \$843 million—and a potential \$1 billion—unfunded liability for long-term claimants, for those people who cannot be helped. Let us do something about it.

It is not under control. WorkCover is not under control, and the responsibility rests on all members of the government to stand up and say that. That is why we have spent the majority of the past two days talking about that other matter that I cannot mention, trying to actually make people understand. The minister, the Premier, the Treasurer, the member for Morialta and each individual government member have a responsibility for this lack of action—this lack of concern for the support provided to injured workers.

That is the key point here: workers are the key to the economic future of this state. We know that there are 775,800 people in work. We know that WorkCover has a direct legislative responsibility for the 500,000 workers under its control. Self-insurers take care of the other 275,000, but they operate under the same legislation. Let us ensure that the member for Morialta stands up and expresses an opinion on WorkCover at every opportunity.

I hope that the member for Morialta rises in response to the comments I have made as part of this Notice of Motion. Also, I hope that the member for Morialta rises, as should all government members, and expresses her personal thoughts about the other matter that I cannot talk about that will be resolved within a few weeks, probably, because her constituents need to hear from her. It is not a joking matter. We are all held to account on ballot box day. For us, the next D day is 20 March 2010. Everything I have said and done, or not said and done, over the past two years, and in the four year term that I serve the constituents of Goyder, will be held to account.

If people do not think I have done the right thing I will be out, and I will respect that and go because obviously they think someone else is better to do the job. But the government needs to realise that as well. There is no God-given right to represent a community. You have to work hard every day when you are representing a community, because they are the ones who elect you. You cannot take it for granted and just give them a condescending look or a brief chat for 30 seconds and think that you have fixed the world as it exists for them. You need to make sure that you are in there fighting for them.

I do not think Labor respects that fact, because they think that they are always going to hold the seats that they hold now. There are some seats in the middle that will swing depending on individual issues and concerns on the day of the election or during the period approaching it but, if you want to have the confidence of people to represent them in this place for any length of time, you want to ensure you are out there all day, every day fighting for their needs. That is what the member for Morialta needs to do on WorkCover, because her people are equally affected by it. Every South Australian is affected by these changes to WorkCover, and she needs to stand up with a strong voice and actually do something about it.

I commend the motion to the house. I hope that there is an opportunity for the member for Morialta to come and answer some of the comments I have made, because it is important for the debate opportunities that exist within parliament that we all have that chance to speak.

Debate adjourned on motion of Mrs Geraghty.