

**CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF THE AUSTRALIAN INDUSTRY GROUP, HEATHER RIDOUT SAYS THE FAIR WORK BILL INTRODUCED INTO PARLIAMENT TODAY IS BY AND LARGE A WORKABLE COMPROMISE.**

HEATHER RIDOUT: Look, by and large, we think the Fair Work Bill is workable; it's been the outcome of a very tough and protracted negotiation. Employers can't get everything they want; the Government's made important concessions which have reduced the risks, but there are certain areas which we remain concerned about and we'll be taking up through the senate.

QUESTION: What are those areas, Heather?

HEATHER RIDOUT: Right of entry I think is an issue. I think the transmission of employment of business, that's an issue. So they're the key ones.

QUESTION: The Chamber of Commerce and Industry has come out and sort of said that - the good is outweighed by the bad. Is there any credence to what they're saying?

HEATHER RIDOUT: I think employers cannot have everything they want out of this bill. The Government have listened hard to employers; they've mitigated a lot of the big risks around content of agreement, about access to pattern bargaining rights, they've really limited that. We can get quick access to the court for injunctions; the access to arbitration is now quite limited.

So I think the - the issues that really weighed on our minds very heavily through the process, we've been able to achieve some important mitigating protections. But, you know, there are changes, unions do have enhanced rights, they'll have to use them responsibly, we're going into an economy

where unemployment is rising not falling. It's going to be a very tough time for business and I think we're going to have to use these rights very, very carefully.

QUESTION: Have you got any advice, I guess, to union bosses who may have in the past [indistinct]...?

HEATHER RIDOUT: If I gave them advice they wouldn't take it [laughs] so, no, my advice is that the parties need to work together responsibly to try and protect the competitiveness of business and to create fair and productive workplaces, that's always been our group's ethic and it's the one we will continue to promote.

QUESTION: Heather, are you happy with Fair Work Australia and how it will be established, and its role?

HEATHER RIDOUT: Oh, indeed, I am much more comfortable with that. I mean the initial proposal was to have all those prosecutory, investigative and judicial functions all put into one, along with all the - you know, the dispute resolution. Now there's been a separation between judicial, the dispute resolution and the prosecutory and investigative functions. So that's a much better outcome.

QUESTION: How's your relationship - I know Ai Group has always had a very good relationship with the Rudd Government, has it stood the test during these negotiations?

HEATHER RIDOUT: Look, it's been very tough, and we've been obviously 15 months or so ago at the ALP Congress I led the charge against it, and that was very tough. And it has been a hard negotiation, but I must say I want to congratulate the Government on a very good process. Julia Gillard's handled it with great

balance and professionalism; the department - her department - has been really very helpful. So, I think of all the processes I've gone through on industrial relations reform - and I've been through a few - this would have to be the best one.

QUESTION: The unfair dismissal laws, do you think it means that business is going to get now stuck with incompetent workers?

HEATHER RIDOUT: I don't think that, but I think again the Government have taken on board issues that we were concerned about, they've put in place exemptions, rights to appeals, the Small Business Code is reasonably workable. But that will have to be tested, and I think we'll see how it goes.

But, clearly, it's not as free and easy as it was before, but it's not as bad as it was before that, either.

QUESTION: They're always talking about the balance; this apparently strikes the balance between unions, employers and employees. Do you think it's a strong argument?

HEATHER RIDOUT: I think you've got to have balanced forces, but the most important thing is people keep their jobs, get paid a fair wage and employers can - can make a dollar too. And, really, in the end disputes are really the minority; most workplaces are productive and that's the way we want it to be.

QUESTION: Those two concerns you mentioned, you said you'd negotiate with the Government on those. Now, if you aren't successful, are you still happy with the legislation?

HEATHER RIDOUT: Well, we'll take it through the senate, we'll have a talk to the opposition, to the

independent senators, to the greens, and they have a responsibility to try and make this workable. And we want to make them understand our concerns.

We're not expecting special treatment in this whole process; we just want good law that works for both sides fairly. And most of this we think we can give it a go, but there are areas that we just want to see some of the sharp edges rubbed off.

As well, a lot of this will have to be tested in the courts; there will be cases which may go all the way, like there always are, to the High Court. So it's a very big change; it's a much smaller bill than the previous one, but - so, you know, another big round. We educated nearly 10,000 companies about WorkChoices and we're going to have to do it all over again [laughs].

QUESTION:

Do you think this calls for a senate inquiry; do you think it would better tested in the real world?

HEATHER RIDOUT:

I think the senate inquiry is important to actually get the best possible starting point. And I think that's a proper process, it's a parliamentary process. The Government would expect us to take any outstanding issues through that process and have a go.

But, in the end, this has got to work in practice; all industrial law [indistinct] changes end up getting tested on the ground. They get tested in the court, they get tested in the commission, and the same will happen on this occasion.

Thank you.