



Coalition 'frightened' on workplace change

Ewin Hannan

The Coalition had its "head in the sand" on the need for substantial workplace policy change because it was "frightened" of a voter backlash, according to resources sector employers.

The Australian Mines and Metals Association chief executive Steve Knott, a long-time advocate for labour market regulation, said on Thursday that years of economic growth had "led to an era of policy complacency in Australian politics".

"Both major parties have got their heads in the sand on the need for fundamental workplace relations reform," Mr Knott said. "Australia is now running out of levers it can pull. The one lever the Coalition is too frightened to pull is IR reform; the same lever the ALP is not allowed to pull because of its union constituency."

Employment Minister Michaelia Cash rejected his comments on Thurs-

day, saying "nothing could be further from the truth".

"The very reason Australians will vote in a double-dissolution election on July 2 is because of our commitment to two vital industrial relations bills," she said, referring to the Australian Building and Construction Commission and Registered Organisations bills.

Mr Knott said the government could avoid the next recession, or at least minimise its impact, by engaging in "critical areas of economic and labour market reform, regardless of how politically difficult they might be".

The AMMA is proposing "five reforms in five years", including the reintroduction of individual statutory contracts, new legal restrictions on strikes and unions entering workplaces, changes to the unfair dismissals laws and a revamp of the Fair Work Commission.

"People need to ask the hard questions like why are we the only country

that prescribes hundreds, if not thousands of minimum terms and conditions," Mr Knott said. "Why do we have a penalty rates system designed for a bygone era and that is now counteractive to employment and small business growth?"

"Why should it take resource employers an eternity to change rosters or make other operational decisions based on rapidly changing market conditions and client needs?"

"A smaller, less invasive government is a more effective and modern government. Apart from setting a national safety net to protect the lowest paid workers, Australia's workplace relations system should get out of the way of businesses, employees and employers."

Senator Cash said the Coalition would deliver its response to the Productivity Commission's workplace inquiry before the election and had released policies designed to address youth employment and worker exploitation.