

THE AGE

Fielding tough on unions

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July 30, 2009

TOUGH restrictions on building workers should remain because Australia had just emerged from an “era where union thuggery ran rampant”, Senator Steve Fielding said yesterday.

Senator Fielding, who could have a crucial vote in deciding the fate of the Government’s proposed changes, said the current coercive interrogation powers — which can see people jailed for not co-operating — were reasonable due to the “unique” history of the industry.

“I view the current coercive powers as being reasonable as they give the top cop some teeth,” he said.

He said the Australian Building and Construction Commission had helped clean up the industry but recent allegations of violence at the West Gate Bridge dispute indicated “union thuggery” was alive and well.

He would move amendments to the Government’s legislation because he was concerned the powers and penalties would be weakened.

The Rudd Government has said they would keep elements of the Howard government building laws including the coercive powers, albeit with greater oversight. The issue has caused tension among unions, and the ACTU — which has expressed “absolute opposition” to the coercive powers — has suggested amendments that would see the powers used in only limited cases as a way to see the laws pass the Senate.