



Speech by

Hon. RUSSELL COOPER

MEMBER FOR CROWS NEST

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APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL; APPROPRIATION BILL

Committee (Cognate Debate)

Estimates Committee D

Report

Hon. T. R. COOPER (Crows Nest—NPA) (5.57 p.m.): I was also pleased to take part in the Estimates process. When Estimates committees were established a few years ago, they were a farce, and people were mainly indulging in point scoring. Slowly we have grown up and matured. I believe that the Primary Industries section of Estimates Committee D went pretty well. I asked 26 questions in 92 minutes. The chairman did a very equable job without an adversarial approach, which really is not necessary if one is seeking information and asking questions. I do believe that the Minister gave honest answers, and I am pleased with that.

The main purpose of Estimates committees is to provide information to help industry—whatever industry it happens to be. In primary industries there is a range of people, from sugar growers, wheat growers, wool growers—

Mr Palaszczuk: No smut this afternoon.

Mr COOPER: No, the Minister has had enough smut. It is smutty stuff. I must admit that I felt sorry for the Minister when he got that one.

Mr Palaszczuk: No need.

Mr COOPER: I understand that there is no need to feel sorry for the Minister for Primary Industries.

During the committee hearing, I raised the issue of President Clinton's address to the National Farmers Union on 15 September, when he made it very clear that American farmers are in deep trouble and that, over the past five years, their income has fallen by 40%. Similar problems exist in Australia, in the common market and in Britain. This all augurs extremely badly for primary industries. That is why the people who get off the ground first and fastest by nailing down niche markets and specialist markets and those who are market smart are going to have a chance of survival in the next year, which is going to be grim. Let us make no mistake; we do not actually have friends—be it the Americans, the British or anyone else. They will compete as hard as anyone. We need to recognise that they are trading competitors, not necessarily partners. Not many industries are going well at the moment, and more will be in trouble in the future.

The Minister is aware that we have work to do for the dairy farmers. The Minister is about to bring in the legislation for the so-called deregulation. It has to be done by 1 January 1999. We know that we will have to work on that with the dairy farmers to ensure that we give them as much protection as we possibly can to see them through a difficult time.

The committee discussed sugarcane smut. The Minister was most concerned with quarantine. I believe that he was not satisfied with the quarantine procedures at some Queensland airports. That is something about which he has to be satisfied, because sugarcane smut is far too dangerous to play around with. We have to protect Queensland's cane industry and ensure that the cane industry in other parts of the nation is protected, because it is an extremely important industry to the nation as a whole.

Of course, the committee discussed aquaculture. The Government is proceeding with the Green Island Reef Fish Aquaculture Facilities. That is a project that the coalition started. We also started the western Queensland freshwater aquaculture program with an allocation of approximately \$1m. That was not proceeded with. I have discussed that project with the Minister, because we need to get those diversified projects going in Queensland. Western Queensland is not just Cunnamulla and Thargomindah; western Queensland is anywhere west of Ipswich and west of the Great Divide. It takes in a huge area of the State. The project is not under control at this point, because the Government has not implemented it. The Government must obtain the funds to implement it, back it and support it. Then primary producers will be able to diversify into other industries. They are very happy to get into aquaculture.

I acknowledge the chairman. He handled the hearings fairly and well. David Thannhauser and Penny Sullivan were certainly efficient and helpful. The departmental officers who turned up for the Estimates committee hearings were sensible. There were not too many smart alecs among them. They addressed themselves to the issues and the problems, which is what I expect them to do. I also acknowledge Brad Henderson in the Office of the Opposition, who helped me put together a very comprehensive list of questions. We wanted answers to those questions in order to help the industry conduct its business throughout the year. That is what the Estimates process is about. It is not just of benefit for one day or two days of glorifying oneself in the media; it is a process of information gathering for the ensuing year.

Time expired.
