



Speech by

HARRY BLACK

MEMBER FOR WHITSUNDAY

Hansard 26 November 1999

PRIMARY INDUSTRY BODIES REFORM BILL

Mr BLACK (Whitsunday—ONP) (4.21 p.m.): While I support the intent of this Bill, I have major concerns about some aspects of it and the manner in which it is being implemented. The main industries in the electorate of Whitsunday which will be influenced by this Bill are sugar, fruit and vegetables and fishing. All these industries will benefit from the removal of the present compulsory membership provisions. This is good news for producers, but I have major concerns about the transitionary process. I can see some logic for retaining the compulsory membership arrangements to ensure that a representative body remains in place to coordinate industry stewardship. However, with the question mark over the legal status of the current levies payable to the statutory bodies, I suspect that it will be even more difficult to validate legislation which imposes levies payable to non-statutory bodies as proposed.

The sugar industry is under siege through declining commodity prices. Many would relish the opportunity to eliminate the extra cost of paying levies. Growers, though, have demonstrated that they are keen to be involved in their industry. Even though membership of Canegrowers is currently compulsory, a large number of growers choose, in addition to that, to be members of ACFA. This demonstrates a responsible attitude to proactive participation in their industry and indicates that the compulsion in this Bill, apart from being on very shaky legal ground, is to a large extent unnecessary. The producers have demonstrated that they recognise the need for a coordinating industry body and a preparedness to be a part of that process. Provided the industry body is effective, producers will support it and, under the ownership of the growers, if it is not effective they will soon make it so.

I am sure that fruit and vegetable growers and fishermen in the Bowen area in my electorate will welcome the winding-back of compulsory levies and the opportunity to have more control over their own destiny by way of ownership of their industry body. It is a pity this legislation is being rushed through with indecent haste, and I certainly have major concerns about the legality of the compulsory membership provisions in the transition period. I also believe that the consultation process with producers has been limited, and I would have preferred to see a poll of producers before embarking on such far-reaching legislative changes. Peak industry bodies are very important to ensure effective representation, and many producers may or may not be in favour of compulsory membership of their peak industry body. They should have had the opportunity to have some say.

In relation to the provisions in the Bill to facilitate the winding-up of the Queensland Abattoir Corporation, I can see the logic in that. I listened with great interest to the member for Bulimba's colourful discourse on the meat industry. Having, myself, had some experience in that industry, I concur with most of his views. I was delighted to hear him talking about how much better we are at processing cattle than the Yanks. I applaud the sentiments of the member for Bulimba and his patriotic support of the Australian industry. It is a pity that his Labor Government squandered millions of dollars subsidising the massive multinational company ConAgra while most of its opposition have been forced to the wall.

I can remember the days when there were a dozen or more meat processors, providing strong competition throughout the State. Through amalgamations and predatory behaviour, most have not survived. ConAgra has played a major role in all this, and here we have a Government offering it a handout. It is a pity the Labor Government has assisted it to gain even greater market dominance, which will allow it to treat cattle producers with even more contempt.

In summary, while I am concerned not so much about the Bill itself but about the method of its implementation, I will support it on the basis that the net result will benefit primary producers.