



Speech by

JEFF KNUTH

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

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PRIMARY INDUSTRY BODIES REFORM BILL

Mr KNUTH (Burdekin—IND) (3.40 p.m.): I think it was the member for Mirani who stated that this Bill could not have been brought on at a worst time. We are still reeling from the effects of the Sugar Industry Bill. Certain circumstances have developed in the Burdekin. As the Minister knows, if some of the amendments moved by members on this side of the Chamber had been approved by this Parliament, we could have avoided those circumstances in the future. The Minister stated that had some of the amendments moved by members of the National Party and me been supported, the single desk arrangement would have been threatened. That is not true, because this Chamber is the highest authority in this State. What this Government says, happens. We do not need a bureaucratic department, such as the National Competition Council, warning us that the single desk arrangement could be threatened. This Government can make a decision to keep single desk selling in this State at any time.

I take this opportunity to raise just a few of the concerns arising in my electorate in relation to the Primary Industry Bodies Reform Bill, particularly in relation to how it applies to the Canegrowers organisation, which is currently funded by a compulsory levy system. The Government claims that it is abolishing the compulsory levy system in which the cane payments are docked in order to fund a group to which they may or may not want to be a party. We are told that this so-called radical new change is to avoid possible legal action against the compulsory levy system. My electorate is curious to know whether the Minister for Primary Industries is aware that under the Primary Industry Bodies Reform Bill, which provides for compulsory membership for three to five years, he has created a situation in which the Canegrowers organisation has structured its constitution in such a way that the payment of levies has been made compulsory without any growers authorising the deduction of their moneys from their mill payments.

Certainly Canegrowers is becoming a company, but the constitution of that company affords members no choice as to whether a levy is garnisheed from their payment. In terms of compulsory levies, the Burdekin electorate is curious to know what the difference is between this so-called reform, which imposes compulsory membership which in turn provides for compulsory levies to be paid, and the structure that farmers have at present. For the next three years at least, this is but a Clayton's reform: the reform you have when you are not really having a reform.

I take this opportunity to inform my fellow members of some of the background to the Bill and highlight issues of the debate that have been kept secret from my electorate and many other electorates. When this draft legislation was passed by Cabinet, it decided that the Bill could go ahead only if the Premier, the Minister for Communication and Information and Minister for Local Government, Planning, Regional and Rural Communities, and the Minister for Primary Industries discussed the matter with the unions. That is right: not the primary industries bodies or the farmers who pay those levies, but the unions.

Initially the unions would not wear the primary industry body arrangements. However, after further talks about the draft legislation—which at that stage had not been seen by Canegrowers or any rural bodies—the unions agreed to the proposals. Cane producers, aquaculture operators, beef producers and fruit and vegetable growers in my electorate want to know what deals were done with the unions to make them change their minds in the space of 24 hours. Why were the unions consulted

before any of the effective bodies had even laid eyes on the legislation? As we heard constantly during the debate on the Sugar Industry Bill 1999, the sugar industry is a multimillion-dollar industry that underpins the wealth and prosperity of this State. So, too, are the many other primary industry bodies affected by this reform Bill.

The length of time taken to debate the Sugar Industry Bill 1999 and the multitude of amendments moved must surely tell the Government that it is unethical to pass legislation without broad and thorough consultation with the grassroots individuals who feel the bite of these changes. Alas, once again the grassroots victims of this legislation have been an afterthought. My electorate is sorely disappointed that the Government has run cap in hand to the unions for their permission to tinker with the livelihoods of the men and women on the land. In given circumstances, the unions have their place, but their place has been rated far too highly in the consideration of this legislation. Farmers throughout Queensland can now only face a hard day's toil wondering what backroom wheeling and dealing took place to deliver them the impacts of this reform Bill.

I believe that the secrecy surrounding this Bill falls far short of inspiring confidence in its formulation. The sugar industry in particular finds itself in a dire state of turmoil with low sugar prices. I urge my fellow members to tread warily when considering the pros and cons of a Bill that could impact heavily on peak primary industry representative bodies such as Canegrowers. I for one want to know more about the deals that were brokered with the unions to allow this Bill to come before the House. I have some questions I would like the Minister to answer. What is the Minister going to do to ensure that the assets paid by growers will be held and used in the future for those who paid the levies in the first place?

Mr Pitt: You should have heard my speech; it answered the question.

Mr KNUTH: I apologise to the member for Mulgrave. I did not hear his speech. Why is this Labor Minister forcing on the producer, Canegrowers and individual growers the equivalent of compulsory unionism? If that is supposed to be a commercial body, why has the Minister forced compulsory membership through statutes? Is the Minister aware of the constitution of the replacement body for the Queensland Canegrowers Organisation and the effect that that constitution will have on Canegrowers with respect to levies or fees due as a result of membership? Has the Minister taken Crown Law advice on the legalities of compulsory membership? If so, what was that advice, and can the Minister table that advice?

I state quite clearly that I fully support Canegrowers. As the local member for Burdekin, many constituents bring to me their troubles and concerns in relation to the sugar industry. Things seem to be moving too fast. We have one Bill after another concerning their lives going through the House. Those people have just gone through the crushing season. There is not enough consultation being carried on in the field. This legislation is being rushed through. There is no reason for this Bill to be rushed through so quickly. Members opposite can argue as much as they like. The fact is that people need time to consider the implications of the Bill so that they can respond back to me and put their thoughts forward. Some places have not yet finished the crushing season. It is time that this Government started giving people time and space to gather their ideas, thoughts and activities and provide some input into this Bill.

The grassroots of the sugar industry was not consulted about this legislation. Members of Canegrowers Burdekin are in the gallery at the moment. I know that they would agree that they have not had a chance to read and study this Bill in fine detail and be consulted.

Mr Mickel: Let your electors know we are on the edge of our seats.

Mr KNUTH: Here we go with the member for Logan, always intervening. I could hear his brains rattling before he had started.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr D'Arcy): Order! The honourable member is very close to unparliamentary remarks. I would suggest that the honourable member temper his language.

Mr KNUTH: I am sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I would like the Minister to answer some of the questions I have put forward. I am quite sure a lot of my constituents would be very interested in the answers to those questions.
