



Speech by

JEFF SEENEY

MEMBER FOR CALLIDE

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PRIMARY INDUSTRY BODIES REFORM BILL

Mr SEENEY (Callide—NPA) (12.27 p.m.): Today once again we are debating primary industries legislation on a Friday, at the end of a long sitting week. There seems to be an attitude on the part of the Government that it is only primary industries, that it is all a bit of a joke—the Minister considers it all to be a bit of a joke—and that it does not really matter, that it is not really important, and therefore we can do it on Friday afternoon when half the House is out to lunch. It is a regrettable attitude and it is well reflected in the Minister's approach to this portfolio over a long period. It is regrettable that every time primary industries matters have to be raised in this House they are raised in this manner.

Anything to do with primary industries is important to me. The House can be assured that anything to do with primary industries is important to the people I represent, because the electorate of Callide is based on primary industries. We are very proud of the contribution primary industries make to this State's economy. We are proud of the professionalism and the ingenuity of the operators who constitute our primary industries. It is about time they were given the recognition and the credit they deserve. It is about time the whole business of farming and the professionals who engage in that career are awarded a much higher level of esteem in the general community, and it is about time they are awarded a much higher level of esteem and a much higher priority in the business of this Parliament.

It is high time that the know-it-all urban media cast aside the old stereotypes and took a fresh look at primary industries and the way it seeks to portray farmers generally. Of late, it seems that everyone is an expert on the core issues that affect our primary industries. Everyone from the Minister, the member for Inala, to the loud-mouthed member for Lytton is suddenly an expert. They know it all. They are experts on resource management. They are experts on industry -

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr D'Arcy): Order! If the member wants to continue his speech, he should temper his language a little and make it more parliamentary. And I will ensure that that applies to members on the other side of the House, if we hear a genuine contribution from the member.

Mr Palaszczuk interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! I just went through the process of warning the member. I also warn the Minister about language in the House. I ask members to pretend that there are some schoolchildren in the gallery.

Mr SEENEY: The point I am trying to make is that this is a serious business for us. This is important for us—unlike the contributions of members opposite, and unlike the interjections that have been made by the Minister and the member for Lytton, which clearly show that this whole issue is a joke to them; that it is not important; that it is something they do on a Friday afternoon when there is nothing else important to be done.

Mr LUCAS: I rise to a point of order. I find the member's comments offensive. I certainly do not consider primary industries as a joke. It is outrageous that he conducts himself in that manner.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! The member has taken a point of order. Does he find the remarks offensive and ask that they be withdrawn?

Mr LUCAS: I ask that they be withdrawn.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! I will ask the member for Callide to withdraw the remarks. At the same time, I warn the House that I will not tolerate those interjections that I am hearing that are unparliamentary. And that goes for members on both sides of the House. The member will withdraw.

Mr SEENEY: I withdraw. As I was saying, of late it seems that everyone is an expert on the core issues that affect our primary industries. Everyone is an expert on the resource management issues. Everyone is an expert on the industry deregulation and the industry development issues. It seems that these so-called experts are claiming expertise from a very safe distance. It is easy to be an expert and develop fine-sounding ideologies from the comfort of urban isolation.

Where I come from, we call those people "bitumen road managers", or another term that is quite often used to describe them is "airconditioned dills". They drive past on a bitumen road, or sit in an airconditioned office, and think that they have all the answers to the very obvious problems that we in primary industries face. Their cute ideologies and oversimplistic solutions do not last long in the harsh economic and climatic reality of the real world of rural Queensland—if those people ever leave the bitumen road and their airconditioned offices and have a go themselves. There are many members of this Beattie Government who fit that description and who display their arrogance and ignorance every time there is a debate in this House about primary industries or resource management issues. We have seen that so clearly portrayed here again today.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! I warn the member again that the analogy he draws—if it is referring to members—is unparliamentary. He must temper his language and get his point across in a more succinct way.

Mr SEENEY: Yesterday, the member for Lytton made an attack on me in this House in regard to my contribution to the debate on primary industries legislation. In contrast to the nonsense that he delivered to this House, members on this side of the House do not claim that we have a mortgage on making contributions to these debates. I judge contributions on any subject on their merit. However, inevitably, when this House debates primary industries legislation, as it is doing today, the contributions from Government members are woeful. They are poorly researched and full of platitudes. And the Minister is as guilty of that as anybody else. They deliver condescending and second-rate contributions.

From the Minister right through to the backbench, there is not one member of this Government who has demonstrated even a basic understanding of the complexities of primary industries. There is no member of the Labor Government who has taken the time or the trouble to genuinely try to understand the real issues.

Mr Lucas interjected.

Mr Musgrove interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! I warn the member for Springwood under Standing Order 123A. That was an unnecessary interjection. I have called for order. I do not want this debate to degenerate any further.

Mr SEENEY: As I was saying, there is no member of the Labor Government who has taken the time or the trouble to genuinely try to understand the real issues that confront primary industries and rural Queenslanders generally. I take this opportunity to urge the Minister and all members of the Government, especially the member for Lytton, who always likes to have a lot to say, to do more than just come into this House and read briefing notes that have been prepared by departmental officers.

I agree with the member for Lytton that all members can make a valuable contribution to the debate no matter what the subject, but the point he so obviously misses—and the point that he so obviously missed yesterday—is that, to do so, every member who joins the debate should try to understand what they are talking about. That is the key. All too often, that is clearly not the case when primary industries issues are debated in this House. I turn now to the legislation.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! I think we will all be relieved to hear that.

Mr SEENEY: This Bill has two elements, as other members have outlined. The first, and most significant, is to provide for the removal of the statutory levy-collecting provisions from the five primary producer organisations, namely, Canegrowers, the Queensland Commercial Fishermen's Organisation, the Queensland Pork Producers Organisation, the Queensland Dairyfarmers Organisation and the Queensland Fruit and Vegetable Growers Organisation. Every one of those organisations has done a very fine job, and every one of those organisations is well represented in my electorate.

I would now like to make some specific comments about the Queensland Dairyfarmers Organisation and the dairy industry generally. Yesterday, I received a letter from a dairy farmer in Mundubbera. That dairy farmer owns quite a large dairy operation, and he has written me a letter which I believe encapsulates the frustration and the absolute exasperation that is being felt by dairy farmers all over Queensland. The writing in the letter is not great by academic standards, especially compared to some of the professional speech writers who seem to write just about all of the Government

members' contributions to this debate, and the syntax tends to be tortured, but this letter is heartfelt and genuine, and I want to read some of it to the House today because I want to share with members the exasperation and the frustration that the dairy farmers in my electorate are feeling.

The letter begins by thanking me and the National Party for some of the work that we have been doing to highlight the inequities in the National Competition Policy. The letter goes on to say—

"There seems to be no benefit to the rural community in general or small business. Our motto is why change when it is working, but the governments of today seem to change everything and leave us all in a state of confusion."

That is a widely held belief or feeling throughout the communities that I represent. The letter continues—

"As you are no doubt aware of the forthcoming deregulation of the Dairying Industry, we would like to express our concerns not only for our family, but for our employees and our community, of the drastic effect it will have with the dramatic drop in income.

There has been discussion about it for some years and yet it has only been recently that we have had some indication on what we will be paid, to take effect in July next year. How much forward planning have we been able to do? We haven't known whether to buy more quota or not, to get larger or smaller, or to go out all together and move into other things. It baffles us as to why it has taken so long for this information to be released ... Recently, in our district alone, due to the uncertainty, there has been quite a number of dairy farms shut down."

I can confirm that that is certainly the case. Mr Loakes goes on to say—

"The processors aren't going to lose! With the new pricing system, and the increase already in milk price their margin will have risen around thirty cents per litre!"

And don't we know that that is true! He continues—

"But the poor dairy farmer should be pitied as his work load will only increase as he can't afford to employ anybody and has to take up even more of the work load because his income has dropped! He won't be able to afford to update machinery, or repair the dairy and the list goes on."

Members can hear the obvious frustration in the words that that particular dairy farmer writes, and it is a frustration that is felt by just about everybody in the industry. He says—

"On the other hand they're giving the excuse for the price rises at present, due to extra costs incurred to the deregulated industry now. Where do we go or how do we get a price rise for our rising costs? Are we able, just out of the blue to get another six cents per litre? No, we're told to be better managers and look beyond 2000."

I know that particular operator. He is a top operator with a large operation. If the level of frustration and anger that he has conveyed in this letter is being felt by an operator like that, then the Minister really should appreciate the difficulties that are facing ordinary, more average-sized dairy farmers across the State.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr D'Arcy): Order! I have been listening to the member for quite some time and I find it difficult to relate what he has said to the Bill before the House, the Primary Industry Bodies Reform Bill.

Mr SEENEY: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I suggest that the Bill deals with the Queensland Dairy Farmers Organisation. I am pointing out some of the issues that are being faced by that particular industry.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: I think the Bill is more specific than that in that it contains provisions relating to the corporations and what is going to happen to them under this Bill rather than the industry in general.

Mr SEENEY: Mr Deputy Speaker, I will make absolutely sure that the Minister gets a copy of the letter that I was referring to. I will take the opportunity to talk in more detail about the problems that are affecting Queensland dairy farmers, particularly the dairy farmers in my electorate, at a later date.

As I said before, this particular Bill removes the statutory levy-collecting provisions from the five producer organisations. In doing so, the Primary Producers Organisation and Marketing Act 1926 and the Fruit Marketing Organisation Act 1923 will be repealed. The transition provides for the removal of the statutory levy for the maintenance of statutory memberships of these organisations for a period of three years. At the conclusion of those three years, a poll will have to be held at which the majority of farmers will have to support continued statutory membership for it to be retained for a further two years. If the poll is not held or if it is lost, the organisation will become totally voluntary after three years. If the poll is successful, the organisations will become voluntary at the end of a five-year period. Within that

three-year to five-year transition period where compulsory membership is provided, it will be up to the organisations to pursue the collection of their levies.

The coalition does not oppose the reform of these organisations. It does not oppose a planned and proper move towards these bodies becoming non-statutory legal entities. However, there must be proper planning and industry consultation. I support the views that were expressed this morning by the member for Crows Nest in that proper planning and industry consultation could not by any means be considered to have taken place. There must be proper planning and industry consultation not just with the leaders of these organisations but with their members throughout Queensland.

This process has seen the Beattie Government hold a gun to the heads of these industry organisations. In reality, it has given them very little choice. The Minister has argued that he has compelling legal advice that justifies the urgent removal of the statutory levy, but he has not provided that advice to the House. Worse still, he has not provided that advice to the organisations, nor has he provided it to their individual members. In the absence of this legal advice, it is difficult to gauge whether the urgency is real or whether the Beattie Government has other motives. Given the record of this Beattie Government, particularly when it comes to its dealings with primary industries, we could be forgiven for thinking that. In fact, it is very difficult to avoid the conclusion that we are not being made fully aware of all the motives that are involved in this legislation.

The Scrutiny of Legislation Committee Alert Digests No. 13 and No. 14 have raised a series of criticisms and concerns about the Bill which the Minister has not been able to address. In the early stages the industry organisations were restricted from conducting proper consultation with their members by secrecy provisions imposed by the Minister and, in the later stages, by the lack of time. Many of the grassroots farmers are angry. Some are angry because the statutory provisions have been taken away, but they are angrier that they have not been consulted about the replacement structures.

Farmers are also very concerned about the treatment of their organisation assets under the transfer and they want to see them protected. The Beattie Government has undertaken to provide ex gratia relief of stamp duty for the transfer of assets to the new replacement structures. However, this undertaking is not provided in the legislation. All the organisations have is the Minister's word. In any event, in most cases the replacement structures will be only transitional structures. Most of the organisations will then be undertaking reviews, including consultation with their members, to set up their new voluntary structures to commence at the conclusion of that three-year or five-year transition period. That means that the assets will have to be transferred again and they will cop stamp duty again. The issue of stamp duty will arise in three to five years' time. For some organisations, that cost will be significant. In simple terms, farmers will be forced to pay tax because of the Beattie Government's failure to recognise the realities.

The coalition does not oppose sensible reform of these organisations with full consultation with grassroots farmers. However, this Bill is a botched, rushed job and little genuine consultation has been undertaken with the industry leaders and very little or no consultation at all has been undertaken with the farmers.

The second part of this Bill is to amend the Meat Industry Act 1993 to facilitate the Government's withdrawal from the meat processing industry and the divestment of the Queensland Abattoir Corporation's abattoirs and assets at Toowoomba, Cannon Hill, Ipswich, Bohle and Bundaberg. The amendments to the Meat Industry Act are broadly in line with what the former Borbidge coalition Government was doing. When the coalition came to office, the QAC had an \$11m debt and had submitted a report on its future, recognising the pressure on its plants from increasing competition, urbanisation, environmental problems and so on. At the time, the Ministers in the previous Labor Government had done absolutely nothing. Recognising that Government no longer needs to have a role in the meat processing sector and that there was significant overcapacity in the industry, putting pressure on private operators, the Borbidge Government began the divestment of the QAC.

Under the existing Act, like any other Government owned corporation, the QAC board has to operate commercially. So as the Government begins winding down the QAC, it will be difficult for the board to continue to do so. These amendments allow for the wind-down and the subsequent appointment of an administrator following the cessation of the board. The QAC will be able to sell assets and land, subdivide, lease land, seek planning approvals and so on. The Beattie Government has announced the closure of the Toowoomba abattoir with the apparent construction of a new abattoir by a private operator, although the details of this are sketchy and difficult to confirm. The Cannon Hill plant is to be sold as an ongoing concern to Australian Country Choice. Once again, the details concerning this particular deal are very difficult to confirm. Suggestions are that land has been gifted to ensure that the project goes ahead.

The Beattie Government also continued the coalition's initiative that began with its Meat Processing Consultative Committee report on the meat industry and the development of an assistance package to facilitate the development of a more competitive industry with greater value adding and

employment. The Beattie Government has been very cagey about the assistance that has been provided under this scheme and other schemes to private abattoir operators. They have announced assistance to the Charleville abattoir, the Darling Downs bacon and Wallangarra abattoirs and also the AMH abattoir at Dinmore.

In recent years, a number of works have closed, including the one at Bowen, and, of course, the one that most affects the area of Queensland that I come from, the South Burnett Cooperative Meatworks. For all the huffing and puffing that has been done in this House about the South Burnett abattoir, it is interesting to note that this morning I received an answer from the Deputy Premier and the Minister for State Development and Minister for Trade to a question on notice that confirms that this Government has paid absolutely nothing towards assisting that meatworks to remain open or to remain in a condition in which it can be reopened.

I asked a question of the Deputy Premier and Minister for State Development and Minister for Trade about how much money his department had actually paid, who they had paid it to and when. The answer to the question was very simple. It said: "No payments have been made by the Department of State Development to date." None! Absolutely none! That is a good indication of the whole attitude that this Government has taken not just to the meat processing industry but to primary industry generally.
