



Speech by

Mr JIM PEARCE

MEMBER FOR FITZROY

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WESTPAC BANK BRANCH, MOURA

Mr PEARCE (Fitzroy—ALP) (11.19 p.m.): Last night, a public meeting was held in the town of Moura. The issue concerned the closure of the local branch of the Westpac Bank. I would like to read into Hansard several paragraphs of a letter I received today from Councillor Trevellyn Evans and Councillor Maureen Clancy of the Banana Shire Council. The letter reads—

"At a community meeting on 22/11/99, represented by a wide cross section of people from Moura township and surrounding areas, it was decided to fight this closure with all means at their disposal.

We know we face an uphill battle, because history has shown us that banks seem more interested in bottom line figures on balance sheets than they do in the needs and futures of rural Australian communities.

The Moura community and surrounding areas have a proud history of solidarity, this has seen us survive the effects of drought, economic downturns and personal tragedy. Our coal mining disasters have welded us into a close knit community who care for one another and we believe this to be one of our strengths.

The thing that came through strongly at our meeting was that the community was not prepared to sit by idly and accept Westpac's decision, many were long term customers of Westpac and they felt betrayed by the bank's actions."

Those sorts of feelings came out at the meeting last night. The bank closure reminds me of some issues that were reported in the media last year. In the wake of last year's Federal parliamentary probe into rural banking, Westpac, ANZ and the Commonwealth banks all announced moves to restore access to financial services and reopen branches in rural Australia. In a Courier-Mail article dated 28 July 1998, Westpac was very critical of the Federal Government's outspoken stance on regional banking, claiming that the company had been unfairly branded "a criminal" for closing branches.

Westpac's Chief Executive Officer, Boss Joss, conceded to the Federal Government's Financial Institutions Committee that banks had a social obligation, but he said that he was disappointed with unfair bank bashing. How quickly the rhetoric is proven to be just that—rhetoric. Westpac is now closing down its Moura branch, with others facing closure in Springsure and Blackwater. Branches are still closing while bank profits are increasing. The people of rural Australia are being let down by fat cats and politicians who are more interested in political point scoring than ensuring that the people of rural Australia get a fair go.

A bank intending to close its doors and move out of a rural town should be required, by some sort of regulation, to disclose to the community the facts and figures on the branch's business. It should be forced to justify its actions. If the community is not taking advantage of the services offered by a bank or if it is not viable because of a lack of business, then the bank should provide that information to the community before closing its doors. Country people will respect a decision that is made fairly and is based on reasonable grounds, but to simply close up shop without releasing figures or information to support the bank's action simply says to me, "Yes, the banks are criminals." They sneak off, taking with them the profits of years of loyal support and leaving the community in a state of despair. Banks are no longer interested in their clients. Customer interaction is with a plastic card and bank statements.

Banks will tell us that the decision to close a branch was taken only after a thorough investigation of all factors affecting the branch's business. However, if one asks them to release the information on all factors investigated, they will say, "Sorry, that's commercial in confidence."

The services that the banks offer through local businesses do not deliver access to bank managers or loans officers. They do not deliver that feeling of belonging that people get from walking into a bank that is a part of their community.

The people of Moura will put up the good fight because they are angry. They feel let down by a business that they have given loyal support to. The people of Moura have now joined the hundreds of other communities across Australia where banks have put the bottom line ahead of social obligations. Sadly, history tells us that Westpac management will simply shut itself away in a vault and hear nothing, and that the Moura Westpac branch will close its doors.
