



Speech by

Mr M. ROWELL

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

Hansard 29 April 1999

MEAT INDUSTRY AMENDMENT STANDARD (No. 1) 1999
Disallowance of Statutory Instrument

Mr ROWELL (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (9.09 p.m.): I think that it is extremely important that we acknowledge what is happening here tonight in terms of this disallowance motion, because the meat industry is a very vital industry for Queensland. If we travel throughout the length and breadth of Queensland, we find a variety of meats being processed. Certainly, the processing side of the meat industry is extremely important and if we are going to make any inroads into the export market, we have to make sure that we have a good, safe product. I think that it is important that the industry recognises the need for the HACCP in terms of meat safety.

Certainly, the QLMA has had a very chequered history. The meat industry has gone right away from having the large wooden blocks that were in the old butcher shops to now having a lot of stainless steel, which is very clean. Of course, those upgrades have cost a lot of butchers a lot of money. I support this disallowance motion that has been moved by the shadow Minister.

Mr Reynolds: Rather sheepishly.

Mr ROWELL: Who is the sheep? I would like to dispel a lot of the untruths that have been uttered. Last year, when the Minister sacked the highly qualified and widely respected QLMA board, he cited financial mismanagement and claimed that the QLMA was \$1.8m in debt. However, in what is becoming a regular occurrence, the Minister's press secretary did not let the facts get in the way of a good yarn. The board refuted the Minister's claims, as did the Opposition. Unaudited accounts showed that the QLMA had liquid assets of \$1.64m, net assets of \$170,000 and no borrowings. Contrary to the Minister's assertions, as at 30 June 1998 the QLMA was solvent—a fact confirmed by the independent legal advice.

A Government member: What about the memos you received when you were the Minister?

Mr ROWELL: I thank the member for prompting me. I will talk about the memos. The Minister was forced to correct his earlier claim and stated that the QLMA was actually operating at a loss. There is quite a bit of difference between the two situations. I do not know if the Minister really understands business, but that is the situation.

How did that situation come about? Because Ed Casey and the Goss Government were not content to rape and pillage the DPI budget but also they extended their destructive path to the QLMA. Historically, the QLMA received an annual \$500,000 contribution from the Queensland Government to fund its share of maintaining safety and hygiene standards, and rightly so. That was necessary. However, Labor saw the QLMA as another hollow log from which it could pull money to fund its pathetic attempts to shore up its electoral support. In desperation, the QLMA was forced to begin diversifying its activities and run down its assets to try to make up the shortfall.

Labor tries to claim the high moral ground and mislead the public into thinking that they are funding their fair share. It does not. The Borbidge Government set about fixing the QLMA's business structure. When I became Minister, that work was well under way. We restructured the authority. We resumed funding the QLMA. In 1996-97, we contributed \$383,750 and in 1997-98 we contributed \$320,000. So members opposite should not lie about the previous coalition Government's

commitment. Despite that, after six years of budgetary abuse at the hands of the Goss Government, the underlying financial problems remained. As Minister, I instructed that a team of independent auditors examine the QLMA's financial position. They did so and endorsed the Government's belief that it had a community service obligation to fund meat safety and hygiene. That was absolutely essential. Tonight, many people have endorsed that obligation. As we have also heard tonight, that finding was endorsed by a report of the Meat Processing Consultative Committee—a report that the Minister has adopted, or claims to have adopted.

The Borbidge Government has been criticised for failing to agree to the introduction of a new fee schedule that would have resulted in fee rises for butchers and slaughter yards—fee rises that are nowhere near the magnitude of those that this Beattie Government now stands ready to implement. I want to expand on that matter, because we are of the opinion that, under this Government, there are to be fee rises of something like 300%. Yes, the Borbidge Government did reject fee rises. Why? Because it knew that butchers and meat processors were doing it tough. The Borbidge Government knew that they had spent thousands of dollars on upgrading their shops and facilities. The Borbidge Government knew that they were battling to compete against intense competition from the big supermarket chains, which are currently knocking about a lot of businesses. Many business are doing it tough. It may be okay for the Minister to sit there and wave his hands around and pick his nose, but the fact is——

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr D'Arcy): Order! A bit more parliamentary decorum, please.

Mr ROWELL: I am simply stating the fact, Mr Deputy Speaker.

A Government member: Get your hand out of your pocket.

Mr ROWELL: I have to keep my hands in my pockets when the members opposite are around, because if they had half an opportunity, they would fleece me of everything that I have. The Borbidge Government knocked back the fee rise.

Mr Cooper interjected.

Mr ROWELL: With the members opposite on the loose, I would be very, very unsafe if I did not have my hands in my pockets.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr D'Arcy): Order! There has been enough frivolity. Could the member for Hinchinbrook please get on with his speech.

Mr ROWELL: If it is a crime to stand up for small business and jobs, then the coalition stands guilty as charged. There is no question about that. However, the Borbidge Government did not ignore the problem and it did not ignore the recommendation of the independent auditors or the report by the MPCC.

Mr Hamill: Who's that?

Mr ROWELL: That is the meat processing committee.

Mr Hamill: Just checking.

Mr ROWELL: I thought that I would let the Treasurer know, because I know that he is not the full bottle on this process. That is what it is all about. The Treasurer is a bit like the Minister, he does not know much about primary industries.

Mr Johnson: A sausage short of a barbecue.

Mr ROWELL: Yes, a sizzler short on the barbecue. It was important to fully understand the issue. At that time, I requested that the director-general, whom the members opposite sacked and which I am very disappointed about because Roly Nieper was a very good director-general——

Mr Cooper interjected.

Mr ROWELL: No, the Minister would not know who he was. However, the former director-general carried out an audit and an assessment to make sure that there were no other outstanding debts. On top of the Borbidge Government's annual contributions, it guaranteed the financial security of the QLMA, and the letter in which we did so has been tabled previously in this House. I did not notice whether the member for Kurwongbah mentioned that letter in her speech. The QLMA was not bankrupt. It made a trading loss, and little wonder after carrying two food safety systems for five years and after the Goss Government ceased funding the Government's annual \$500,000 contribution.

There was no need to sack the board and appoint the Government's Labor lackey. There was no need for these new fee increases. All that was needed was for the Beattie Government to maintain the commitment provided by the Borbidge Government. Instead, the Beattie Government ignored its funding responsibilities, and now it is set to strip the cash registers of small businesses throughout Queensland.

Mr Pearce: Give us some examples.

Mr ROWELL: I would like to really expand on the matter as it affects small business, because I think that it is absolutely crucial. I will give the member opposite one example of a businessman in Innisfail, who used to be a Labor supporter. He said to me, "After talking to Peter Beattie"——

Time expired.
