



Speech by

Hon. RUSSELL COOPER

MEMBER FOR CROWS NEST

Hansard 29 April 1999

MEAT INDUSTRY AMENDMENT STANDARD (No. 1) 1999

Disallowance of Statutory Instrument

Hon. T. R. COOPER (Crows Nest—NPA) (5.45 p.m.): I move—

"That the Meat Industry Amendment Standard (No. 1) 1999 (Subordinate Legislation No. 53 of 1999) tabled in the Parliament on 13 April 1999, be disallowed."

As most honourable members would know, the Queensland meat industry has a long and proud history. It is comprised of the beef, sheepmeat, chicken and pork industries and, in later years, it has grown to include the deer, emu and goat industries. It is worth some \$1,600m to the Queensland economy in terms of export and domestic markets. Collectively, these industries are Queensland's largest primary industries. The meat industry is also significant in that these industries are represented in every region of the State and are one of this State's largest employers. It provides jobs on the farm and in processing, retailing and distribution.

Since Queensland was first settled, the meat industry has striven to improve its productivity and the quality of its product. These efforts have stepped up over the years, and particularly in the last decade, as the industry has embraced new technology and better management techniques to improve its competitiveness. In fact, our meat industry is up with the world's best and, arguably, is the world's best.

One area in which the meat industry has certainly led the way has been in its continual and considerable efforts to improve meat safety and hygiene standards. The meat industry has recognised that food safety is paramount in the minds of consumers and it has met that need. In fact, retail surveys have shown that food safety now ranks as a higher priority than price in the minds of consumers.

The Queensland meat industry has an exemplary record in terms of meat safety and hygiene. We have not had a Garibaldi incident. We have not had mass food poisonings such as those in the United States. In fact, since 1993 I am unaware of any instance of food poisoning from meat purchased through a butcher shop. In Queensland, safety and hygiene standards in the meat industry have been administered by the Queensland Livestock and Meat Authority—QLMA—under the auspices of the current Meat Industry Act since 1993. Prior to that, the meat industry was administered by the Livestock and Meat Authority of Queensland—LMAQ.

Prior to 1993, safety and hygiene standards were maintained through an inspectorate-based system whereby qualified meat inspectors assessed meat quality on a largely visual basis. As technology and our understanding of food safety have improved both in Australia and abroad, new and more effective methods have been developed to ensure food quality. These have been based around the principles of quality assurance.

In simple terms, that means ensuring the quality of the product and minimising the risk of contamination at every stage of the food production chain. The Queensland meat industry has been a leader in the adoption of quality assurance since it was first introduced through the QLMA in 1993. That program, called Q-Safe, has been instrumental in the development of the industry's impeccable record. By his own admission, the Minister for Primary Industries has conceded that the Queensland meat industry is a leader in meat safety. In fact, it has led the nation and most other food groups in the adoption of internationally recognised quality assurance principles.

Mr Palaszczuk interjected.

Mr COOPER: That is exactly right. But the Government does not have to charge through the nose to do that. It has to spread its costs. Everyone in this State is benefiting from improved standards of hygiene. Therefore, everyone should meet their share of the cost. That is what we are saying. It should not all be put on the butcher. That is where the Minister is wrong. A 315% increase in some circumstances—from \$280 to \$881—is grossly unfair. It is wrong.

By last year, every single butcher shop, slaughter yard and meat processor had adopted the Q-Safe program. That is a tremendous achievement and I pay tribute again to every single butcher, slaughterman and meat processor. But that has not come cheap. Most honourable members would be old enough to remember the butcher shop of old, with the wooden chopping block and sawdust on the floor. Those days are now long gone. Recently, I was in a butcher shop in Sydney. They said, "Thank heavens we don't live in Queensland." They still have a bit of sawdust on the floor and use wooden chopping blocks and so on. Queensland is so far out in front. However, as I said, that has come at a massive cost. We cannot keep loading that onto the butcher. That is where this is so grossly unfair.

If we look inside any Queensland butcher shop or meat processor, we will not see a stick of timber anywhere. Instead, we will see stainless steel and more stainless steel. Behind the counter we will see a trained professional who will know more about safety and hygiene standards than anyone in this House ever will. Each of those butchers has spent thousands of dollars upgrading his shop to comply with Q-Safe. In spite of their achievements, they have not been rewarded with more efficient QLMA administration and cheaper fees, as they were promised when Q-Safe was introduced.

Instead of having their efforts recognised and rewarded, they have been penalised. In fact, the Beattie Government has now moved to introduce massive new fees—a decision which has broken the Premier's pre-election promise not to increase taxes and charges above the CPI. These fees will range up to 315% above those paid less than one year ago when the Borbidge Government left office. We have heard a lot of rot in recent weeks from the Minister and the acting Minister, the member for Mount Isa, and even the Premier in their attempts to justify these massive new fee increases. If Government members do not believe that this is happening, they should ask the butchers. They are the ones who know. They are the ones who are writing the cheque. When they write the cheque, they feel it. They know exactly how much more they are paying.

Since the day dot, Government at all levels has usually acknowledged that it has a role to play in maintaining food safety and hygiene standards. This was also the case for the QLMA until former Primary Industries Minister Ed Casey set about dismantling the DPI, sacking DPI officers and even went to the extent of thieving the State Government's annual \$500,000 contribution to maintaining meat safety and hygiene. At that time, the QLMA was running both the old meat inspectorate system and introducing the Q-Safe program—in effect, two costs being funded from a budget that was \$500,000 in the red. That is where the trouble started.

Despite repeated pleas from industry, Casey and then Gibbs, who followed him, ignored their obligations to fund food safety. In desperation, the QLMA tried to develop other income streams through a consultancy business, through research and development and by running down its assets. Predictably, the financial position deteriorated. When the Borbidge Government took office in 1996, the QLMA was in desperate trouble, and we set about fixing it. We got it back to its core responsibilities of meat safety and hygiene; we restructured and decreased the size of the board; we asked for a business plan; we resumed Government's rightful contributions to the QLMA to help it ensure meat safety and hygiene for Queenslanders; and we guaranteed the financial security of the QLMA. That was never under question.

The QLMA never made a profit, nor should it. It is not a company; it is a service provider to the people of Queensland, and the people on the other side of the House should know that. On taking office, the Minister sacked the highly qualified, extremely well regarded and politically independent board to appoint his own political adviser. At the time the Minister made much of the Government's obligation to funding food safety and hygiene. But through the new fees, it has shown that it was only ever lip-service. It tried hard to hide it, but the truth remains that the Beattie Government will not fund its rightful share towards maintaining meat safety and hygiene.

Mr Palaszczuk: We've done it.

Mr COOPER: When the Minister says that he has done it, all I can keep saying is: go back to the butchers; they are the ones who know and they are the ones who are going to tell him right across the State.

What the Government did not tell us was that the 8% increase was only the annual accreditation fee. Where previously under the Borbidge Government the cost of audits was included in that fee, this Labor Government has now introduced a charge of \$100 per hour. Those cost increases come on top of the QLMA's scrapping of a 30% rebate in September last year. So in July last year when a Category A butcher employing between 3 and 10 people, producing fresh meat and

smallgoods, sat down to write his cheque to the QLMA, he filled it out for \$280 flat— everything included, not one cent more.

This year, under the Beattie Government's new meat tax, that same butcher will be up for \$881 for exactly the same level of service that he received last year. Even those top Category C butchers requiring only one audit per year—the apparent concession that the Minister awarded the industry—will face an increase from \$280 to \$431 per year, an increase of upwards of 200%. If anyone doubts me, I will now table the new fee schedule and a comparison with what the same butchers and processors paid last year. It is there in black and white for all to see. Perhaps the Minister would like to look at it himself. It is absolutely damning.

Mr Palaszczuk: The 1st of July?

Mr COOPER: I am saying that the difference between what they paid last year and what they pay this year is very emphatic; it is clear and they know it. They are the poor beggars who have to pay it.

Mr Palaszczuk: You're wrong.

Mr COOPER: I am not wrong; the Minister is wrong. His political policy adviser has sold him a pup and he is going to pay the price for that. That is a pity.

Instead of the Minister's Government living up to its claims about the Government's joint responsibility for food safety and hygiene, it is ripping the money out of the mums and dads of the meat industry, because that is who these fees will hurt hardest—the small family butcher, the small family slaughterman and the people who work for them. While the big supermarkets simply factor the increase into their margins, the butchers either pull their belts in yet another notch or just shut up shop.

Some honourable members might be wondering why I started my speech with a history lesson. I did it for a very good reason. I wanted to try to illustrate to all members here just exactly what the meat industry has been through to get to where it is now—the efforts that butchers and meat processors have made, the thousands of dollars that they have spent. They have made their industry the leader in food safety at a time when competition for the consumer dollar has never been tougher. The supermarkets with their massive buying power and competitive pricing have placed enormous pressure on the small retailers, and we all know that.

What an absolute kick in the guts it is when, after all their effort and all the expense to achieve the highest standard, this Government now hands them this massive meat tax! While their neighbour the fish and chip shop or the baker pay their annual \$140 to the local council for the maintenance of their safety and hygiene standards, the butcher will be paying his \$881. It is small wonder that these hardworking people are so angry with this Beattie Government. It is small wonder that my colleagues and I have been inundated with phone calls and letters. It is small wonder that in just a couple of weeks I was able to collect over 2,500 signatures on a petition. It is small wonder that small businesses wonders why they bother.

Queensland cannot afford to lose one more small business or one more job, and rural and regional Queensland cannot afford to lose one more small business or one more job. But that is what will happen if this disallowance motion is not successful. Every member on the other side of the House has butchers in their electorates. They will be watching tonight to see how their local member votes. If they vote for an increase of over 300% in those butchers' meat tax, they will hear from them. It is their chance now to reject it, and so they should reject it.

Whoever votes against this motion will be voting against small business and jobs in their own electorates—make no mistake about that. The people will let their members know; they do not have to listen to me. The Beattie Government was supposed to be a Government obsessed with jobs—a Government for all Queenslanders. These fees prove that that is all rhetoric. I urge all members to put their electorates first—put their butchers first—and vote this motion down.
