



Speech by

Hon. RUSSELL COOPER

MEMBER FOR CROWS NEST

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NATURAL DISASTER ASSISTANCE

Hon. T. R. COOPER (Crows Nest—NPA) (7.15 p.m.): Farmers across many areas of Queensland have suffered at the hands of the elements over the past 12 months—from Cyclone Rona and flooding in south-east Queensland to huge unseasonal winter rainfall across much of Queensland's grain belt last year. Many farmers are now in a desperate financial situation and will need assistance to recover.

Assistance has been offered in the form of exceptional circumstances declarations and through the Queensland Rural Adjustment Authority—QRAA. However, the facts are that exceptional circumstances assistance is no panacea. We recognise that it does put food on the table and that that is necessary in the first instance. However, the offers of assistance from QRAA are largely useless, as the Minister will probably know. Lots of applications are coming in, but they rarely fit the guidelines. I can assure the Minister that that is true. At times of natural disaster we often say, "Don't worry. It will be all right. QRAA will fix you up." However, it does not.

Mr Palaszczuk: The guidelines have been relaxed.

Mr COOPER: The guidelines need to be relaxed further in order to make sure that we can do something for these people, a lot of whom have experienced a double whammy. For example, last year canegrowers experienced low c.c.s. harvests and cyclones both last year and this year. A lot of them cannot afford to pay rates. They could not do so last year, so I do not see how they will be able to do so this year. That is why we have to look at providing some form of assistance involving financial restructuring on a major scale. This is a major financial disaster for the nation.

All Governments have to play their role in order to make sure that we can bring these people back. Offering restricted financial assistance after the event is simply not good enough. I mention again, as I did this morning, that crop insurance represents the best opportunity to minimise risk. In recognition of that, the Borbidge Government abolished the 8.5% stamp duty on crop insurance in its 1998-99 Budget—a decision widely applauded by farmers. As an example of the value of that initiative, a farmer paying a premium of \$30,000 would have saved \$2,550 in stamp duty. The first of the can't do Beattie Government's few decisions was to scrap that tremendous initiative and once again slug those doing the right thing with an unfair tax.

When the Federal Minister for Agriculture, Mark Vaile, suggested that there had to be a better way of countering natural disasters and proposed a wide-ranging national crop insurance scheme, members opposite bucketed it. No-one has said that it will come in at all. What the Minister wants is a wide-ranging discussion about whether we can do better in relation to crop insurance and handling natural disasters, be it from fruit bats, hail, frost, drought, flood, fire and so on. We have to do better.

It is no use being seen as reasonable by making false offers of QRAA assistance when we know that people cannot fit the guidelines. We have to do more than that. Farmers in such dire straits need more than that. They do not need handouts. We are not saying that at all. What they need is food on the table for a start and then medium to long-term restructuring of their finances. The more loans people are given the more they have to pay back. That is a worry. We have to give them relief from immediate heavy repayments by restructuring their loans over a longer period. Some banks are now offering loans with 15, 20 and 25 years of interest-only repayments. They are starting to recognise that financing in the rural sector is totally different from the 1 July/30 June system that operates elsewhere.

It is different and it has to be treated differently. I also mention the fact that those floods affected the electorate of Crows Nest—Crows Nest Shire and Esk Shire. I have had good warning from those people there that, while the rains were very good—they filled the dams: Wivenhoe, Somerset, Crestbrook and Perseverance—they did cause some damage, especially in the Esk Shire, where the damage cost was up to \$4m. I will certainly be following through in relation to those shires to ensure that the flood damage is rectified through the normal financial processes. But, as I said, there have been double whammies that have hit the sugar producers, the pawpaw producers and the banana producers, particularly those in north Queensland. They are in dire straits, and offering QRAA and those simple forms of assistance is not going to do the job.

Time expired.
