



Speech by

Hon. RUSSELL COOPER

MEMBER FOR CROWS NEST

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QLMA FEES; BUTCHERS

Hon. T. R. COOPER (Crows Nest—NPA) (7.20 p.m.): This morning I touched briefly on the Opposition's grave concerns for the future of the family butcher, small meat processors, slaughter yard operators and other meat industry businesses under the Beattie Government. This evening, I will expand further on that.

Members will recall last October when the Minister for Primary Industries sacked the QLMA and appointed his political adviser, Mr Bob McCarthy, in its place. At the time, the Minister claimed that the sackings were no reflection on the integrity of the board members, which is a quite farcical statement and another slap in the face for those highly regarded industry experts. The sackings were apparently necessary to address the alleged financial difficulties facing the QLMA and an administrator was necessary to correct the position of the authority. This is despite the fact that the board's audited reports did not back the Minister's claims and that he was forced to correct them. It is despite the fact that the former Borbidge administration recognised the Government's community service obligations to ensure food safety and hygiene standards and had guaranteed the financial security of the QLMA in a letter from the then Minister, the member for Hinchinbrook, to the then chairman, Mr Richie Goldup, of 14 May 1998. However, the Beattie Government avoided that community service obligation, threw out the guarantee offered by our Government and appointed Mr McCarthy in the board's place.

At the time I warned that the Beattie Government was set to follow in the tracks of the Goss Government and introduce full cost recovery for the QLMA, and unfortunately that prediction now looks set to transpire. Mr McCarthy is currently moving to introduce a new schedule that imposes a full fee for service, which will increase fees by more than 100% for many butchers. The new fee schedule covers only one hygiene audit per year and demands full cost recovery for all other required audits. The going rate for those audits is proposed to be \$100 an hour and many butchers need two or three audits per year in order to meet the Government imposed requirements under the Q-Safe program. That means that a category A butcher who is currently paying \$300 per year will now be slugged with a bill for \$625—an increase of over 100%. That sort of fee increase cannot be justified and does not acknowledge in any way whatsoever the financial difficulties that many small meat businesses are suffering. The most unjust thing about those increases is that they will hit those who can least afford them the hardest, that is, the small family-owned butchers and slaughterhouse operators. They will hit those in regional Queensland and those in the bush. It is almost like the Goss Labor Government all over again. We have heard this all before. It closed down rural and regional Queensland back then, and that is starting all over again. It is the same old story. They are singing the same song.

The Queensland meat industry has led the way in the adoption of quality assurance-based food safety and hygiene and it deserves tremendous credit for its efforts. Its reputation for safety and hygiene standards is paramount, but that achievement has come at a considerable cost to butchers, meat processors and slaughterhouse operators who have upgraded their facilities to Q-Safe requirements while struggling against the market power of the big three supermarket chains and other food outlets that do not bear costs of this magnitude. However, what reward is the meat industry getting from this Beattie Government for its achievement? Increased fees! What incentive is the Government offering to other food industries that want to follow the meat industry's example and lift their safety and hygiene standards for the consumers' benefit? Increased fees!

The Primary Industries Minister has made a lot of big statements in the public arena and here in the Parliament that the Government has a community service obligation to ensure meat safety and hygiene and a responsibility to fund that community service obligation. However, it appears that the Minister has forgotten those statements as his political adviser Mr McCarthy prepares to pick the industry's pockets again, just as the Goss Government did when it plundered the annual \$500,000 State Government contribution to running the QLMA back in the early 1990s. It now seems that the Minister's statements were nothing more than the rhetoric that we have come to expect from the Labor Government.

The fee increases do nothing to promote small business. They are just another attempt to stack the odds further in favour of the supermarkets. Those sorts of policies will destroy small business across Queensland and they will destroy jobs. The State National/Liberal coalition supports the Queensland meat industry absolutely. We support the butchers, the slaughter yard operators and the meat processors. We will not support any attempt by this Government to slug them with more unjustified and unfair fees. I call upon the Minister for Primary Industries to show the same support for our meat industry. He should stand up for small business, stand up for jobs and rule out these fee increases.
