



Speech by

Hon. RUSSELL COOPER

MEMBER FOR CROWS NEST

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UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND; GATTON COLLEGE

Hon. T. R. COOPER (Crows Nest—NPA) (5.58 p.m.): I move—

"That this Parliament condemns the progressive running down of the University of Queensland Gatton college and calls for the Queensland Government to support the establishment of an international centre of excellence in agriculture at Gatton college."

Gatton college, which is well known to most Queenslanders, if not all, is probably Queensland's oldest tertiary institution. For over 100 years it has been the nation's premier institution for agricultural education and research. Gatton college has a very high reputation not only in Queensland and Australia but also overseas. Over the past century, Gatton college has turned out literally thousands of quality graduates to a whole field of industries. However, despite this proud record, there is now a very real risk that if decisive action is not taken very soon, there is a possibility that Gatton college could well close down.

As most members will be aware, Gatton college is now part of the University of Queensland and has been since 1989-90. There has always been a loose relationship between the University of Queensland and Gatton college, but as a result of the Dawkins' enforced consolidation process, Gatton college formally became part of UQ. Prior to and at the time of consolidation, all manner of assurances were given that Gatton college would retain some autonomy until the eventual amalgamation of the two institutions for their mutual benefit.

A number of reviews have recommended that, in order to capitalise on the strengths of Gatton college and UQ, an international centre of excellence in agriculture be established at Gatton that would incorporate UQ's then faculties of agricultural science and veterinary science. In the years since then, we have seen aspects of the consolidation taking place. However, the vast bulk of this consolidation has been one-sided and to the detriment of Gatton college. The renowned Brahman cattle stud has been dispersed, as has the Arabian horse stud. The egg farm has been closed down and the administrative functions have been relocated to the St Lucia campus, just to name a few. Of most impact is the relocation of the business and hospitality faculties to the Ipswich and Brisbane campuses.

By the end of the year, Gatton could well have lost hundreds of students, further threatening the college's viability. Indeed, the loss of those students is already being felt with student numbers below the critical mass necessary to make the college economically viable and to enable student services to be delivered. While arguments can be made for the relocation of those courses, it is of very considerable concern that many associated with the Gatton college have watched the increasing reluctance to relocate the agricultural science faculty and elements of the veterinary science faculty to Gatton as previously planned.

The centre for international excellence in agriculture looks to be an increasingly unlikely prospect. In the midst of this, representations have been made to the Premier, the Education Minister and the Primary Industries Minister, but to no avail. All three have tried to wash their hands of any involvement in this issue and have avoided using the State Government's not insignificant influence to shore up the future of Gatton college. It seems that the Beattie Government is all too willing to watch the college wither on the vine and close down. One wonders whether we would see the same reaction from this Government if the Conservatorium of Music was at risk of closing.

The Beattie Government should be reminded that this is not just an issue in the electorate of Lockyer and should not dismiss it as politically irrelevant to its re-election chances. This is a public issue of great concern in south-east Queensland and, indeed, throughout Queensland. As such, all people, including politicians, are entitled to a view and to represent their people. All stakeholders, industry staff, current students, past students and potential students have a desire to see Gatton college continue and prosper. The centre of excellence is the means to achieve that.

Further, the Borbidge Government also initiated the establishment of a world-class animal health institute. The first stage of that process involved examining the feasibility of co-locating the veterinary laboratory facilities of the DPI, the university and the CSIRO. Those agencies' existing facilities are ageing and in need of upgrading or replacement. It makes eminent sense that, rather than all three bodies investing money in bricks and mortar, their resources be pooled and invested in one facility so that more money can be directed into actual research, education and extension. On top of that financial benefit, there is a tremendous benefit in developing much closer relationships between the three bodies, staff researchers, lecturers and students for their mutual benefit. That study was investigating two locations, with Gatton college one of the favoured sites. Queensland has massive potential to become a world leader in animal health and the animal health institute would help achieve that. Regardless of the final location, Gatton college would have played a huge role in the institute, further shoring up the college's pre-eminent place in tertiary education. It has been of considerable dismay to the coalition that this vision has not been carried over by the Beattie Government. Only a few weeks ago on ABC radio in Toowoomba the Primary Industries Minister virtually sounded the death knell for the project.

In discussing the future of Gatton college, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge that the number of students entering tertiary education in agricultural fields has declined over the years. This has had an effect on most agricultural institutions around Australia. It is not only Gatton college that is suffering a downturn. Two reasons are often offered to explain this. One is that as technology improves there is an overall lesser requirement for employees in the agricultural field, and that is possibly true to some extent. The other is a more serious reflection on the situation in many of our primary industries, that is, that many young people either do not want or cannot see a future for themselves in those industries.

Despite the advance of technology, there will always be a requirement for quality graduates schooled in agricultural and veterinary science in all manner of pursuits. The Premier has often talked about biotechnology as a booming industry. Biotechnology is increasingly significant in the agricultural industries and will require graduates. Biotechnology and the animal health institute would go hand in hand.

There is a future in agriculture for young people. Whether members opposite acknowledge it or not, this country and particularly this State still rely on our primary industries. While commodity prices have not been the best in many industries and the climate has played havoc with the fortunes of many of our farmers, there is a future in agriculture and it is a bright one. Our primary producers are some of the most efficient in the world, and our products are internationally regarded for their quality and their clean, green status. Primary industries are one of our greatest strengths. We would be capitalising on that strength. The Queensland Government does have a role to play in creating that future. All it requires is some vision on the part of the Beattie Government, some commitment to the future of our primary industries and some commitment to encouraging young people to seek careers in agriculture.

The future of Gatton college is paramount to the future of our primary industries. It is extremely disappointing that the uncertainty surrounding the future of Gatton college has been allowed to continue by the Beattie Government. For a Government that claims to be a can-do Government, it has done very little as far as Gatton college is concerned. However, I am not here to dwell on the indifference, to date, of the Beattie Government.

This debate is about sensible and positive ideas and initiatives to put Gatton college back on the road to success in the year 2000 and beyond. It is not a negative and destructive debate, but a positive contribution. This motion calls on the Government to do something constructive. It calls on the Queensland Government to make an investment in the future of agriculture and the future of Queensland.

The Queensland Nationals are deeply concerned about the situation that Gatton college finds itself in. We seek the bipartisan support of all members to ensure that this invaluable institution is not lost through a lack of foresight or a lack of vision. I call on all members to support this motion for the establishment of a centre of excellence in agriculture at Gatton college.

Recently there has been some talk from various quarters that politicians should butt out of the debate, but this is a public issue. Gatton college, which has such a long history, involves all people whatever their political colour and whatever their walk of life. If people have a deep feeling for Gatton college and its future, they should be entitled to express their views and express them constructively

and well. That is what we on this side of the House are doing. This is a constructive discussion about the future of Gatton college. It is not a question of people laying blame at the door of the University of Queensland or anywhere else. It is a case of recognising that the college has had a wonderful past and it has given us a lot. Therefore, we need to look after it and re-establish it, utilising modern technology. That is all we are saying. We do not want to see the college go down.

It is when little appears to be happening that people start to get worried—very worried—especially those in the Gatton area. However, this issue affects all of south-east Queensland, and indeed the whole State if not the nation, because of the contribution that that college has made. No-one will lie down on this issue. We want to ensure that we do something constructive. We would rather it do it together than to fight and squabble over it. I hope we get a constructive contribution from the other side of the House. I have great pleasure in moving this motion.
