



Speech by

Hon. RUSSELL COOPER

MEMBER FOR CROWS NEST

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PRIMARY INDUSTRIES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Hon. T. R. COOPER (Crows Nest—NPA) (4.56 p.m.): The Primary Industries Legislation Amendment Bill 1999 contains a number of important amendments to a series of existing Acts. We do not deal with a lot of primary industries legislation in this place and this debate affords members on both sides of the House an opportunity to address issues relevant to the amendment Bill. While some people might want us to rush the legislation through the House, we have no intention of doing so. We believe that, despite the fact that we support the Bill and its amendments, all the matters contained in the legislation need to be addressed. Indeed, we realise the importance of the legislation, especially for the grain and barley industries.

It is a pity that the legislation has been left lying around for so long. I do not blame the Minister for that. I believe that the Government needs to address itself to the importance of primary industries to the State of Queensland.

Mr Palaszczuk: The coal industry Bill went on for about four days.

Mr COOPER: I realise that, but this is the primary industries Bill and the coal industry is another matter. The Agricultural Standards Act 1994 is amended by the Bill. The Opposition accepts that the amendment fixes a mistake made in the amendments that were made to the Act last year regarding vendor declarations for stock, that is, false and misleading representations about stock. Accordingly, we support the deletion of those superfluous words as outlined in the amendment.

Amendments to the Chicken Meat Industry Committee Act 1976 follow the recommendations of a review of the chicken meat industry that was commissioned by the former coalition Government in line with the State Government's National Competition Policy requirements. Importantly, this review was not simply foisted upon the industry. The former coalition Government was intent on involving those who know most about the chicken meat industry in the review, so representatives of the industry were included on the committee. There were differences and some difficulties along the way, but in the end consensus was achieved on the shape that the industry should take. I pay tribute to both the grower and the processor representatives for their constructive and pragmatic approach to the task.

The chicken meat industry is a highly specialised and intensive industry, which is characterised by the fact that growers are contracted to relatively few processors. Given the scale and specialist nature of the investment involved for chicken farms and given the potential for an imbalance of market power, it is essential that chicken producers are afforded some framework to negotiate growing contracts. The framework has been provided through the Chicken Meat Industry Committee. However, under the previous Act, I understand that there was some doubt about the legality of the arrangements for those negotiations under the Trade Practices Act. The review addressed this issue as well as others.

The coalition supports the ability of growers and processors to negotiate contracts independently and the retention of a legislative framework for collectively negotiating contracts between growers and processors. The framework provides a balance of market power between growers and processors, which is crucial to the successful operation of both sectors of the industry. Clarification of the dispute resolution process and an altered role for the chairman should enhance the operation of the Chicken Meat Industry Committee and the industry as a whole.

I note that the Scrutiny of Legislation Committee held concerns with respect to the retrospectivity of these amendments, given that these changes were to be made by 1 July 1999. In reply, the Minister stated that the limited number of parliamentary sittings dates has led to the Bill not receiving assent prior to 1 July as proposed. To some extent that may be true. However, I share the concerns of the Scrutiny of Legislation Committee and I add my own concerns that it is becoming an all-too regular occurrence under the Beattie Government that primary industries legislation seems to have been deemed of little importance and is not afforded the priority it deserves. The Dairy Industry Bill was rushed through in the last week of Parliament last year for commencement on 1 January. The Primary Industries Legislation Amendment Bill has also been delayed.

The chicken industry has had its share of problems throughout the year, as have a lot of other primary industries. That will always continue. The main issue is how we deal with those problems. Recently, I believe there was a third outbreak of Newcastle disease in New South Wales. We all remember the first outbreak. I believe the current outbreak, at Schofields, south-west of Sydney near Liverpool, centred on an egg-laying operation. That outbreak affected about 8,000 birds. It is worth highlighting that these outbreaks have produced enormous costs. There have been two outbreaks prior to this latest one. I believe the final cost of the Mangrove Mountain outbreak, which honourable members would recall occurred earlier this year, has not been determined, but it is in the vicinity of \$18m to \$20m, which is a huge amount of money. That figure takes into account losses in the industry and all of the clean-up operations that had to be carried out and in respect of which Queensland played its part.

I have stayed in touch with the industry through people in my area. I pay tribute to Mrs Ivy Inwood. The Minister would probably know Ivy. She certainly keeps everyone involved. It would be good if all industries had people like her who take an active interest in and also a sensible approach to their industry. That would make the Government's job a lot easier and provides an indication of whether we are on the right track. Ivy will certainly tell us if we are not. I mention also Jim and Margaret Sloane and Janelle and Dennis Hinze, who have also been in touch with the Minister and kept us fully briefed on those outbreaks. I am told that the farmer at the centre of the recent outbreak near Liverpool can only speak Spanish. He obviously had some problems getting his message across when he noticed that eight of his birds had died on Wednesday, 18 August. He contacted his feed supplier, who passed him on to a local vet, who in turn contacted the nearby Elizabeth Macarthur Agricultural Institute. He was not sure whether the outbreak was Newcastle disease. However, they have had three such outbreaks in recent times, and they are alert to the problem, and so they should be. The worry is that it may not be long before that disease enters Queensland. We want to keep it out at all costs. We remain alert to that. I am not criticising the New South Wales authorities at all. I am simply saying that there certainly seems to be a problem in that respect. We have to be very vigilant.

I refer also to the belated introduction of the Sugar Industry Bill. As I said, this Bill crosses a whole range of issues. I believe the Minister intends to delay the passage of that Bill through this place until about October.

Mr Palaszczuk: That's different to your mate behind you, who has been talking the industry into delaying the Bill and telling me, on the other hand, in this House to speed it through.

Mr Rowell interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Reeves): Order! I remind honourable members to speak through the Chair.

Mr COOPER: I am happy to.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: That would assist the member for Crows Nest to continue his speech.

Mr ROWELL: I rise on a point of order. I think the information being provided by the Minister is not factual. I have not been trying to do anything as far as the Sugar Industry Bill's passage through this House.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: There is no point of order.

Mr COOPER: I support my colleague, because I believe the Minister has got his wires crossed. His accusation is untrue. The member for Hinchinbrook has not been trying to get the industry to irresponsibly delay legislation. The legislation has been delayed because there has not been enough time to put it through the Parliament. As I said, the importance of the Sugar Industry Bill has not been recognised by the Government. I urge the Government to take a lot more notice of primary industries legislation, which is of great importance and needs to be allocated adequate time for discussion in this place. I urge the Minister to use the time arising from the delay in the passage of this Bill to listen to the growers.

Mr Palaszczuk: We do.

Mr COOPER: He has a bit more time now. There are still some problems out there. The Minister is aware of our amendments. Now is the time for those to be given greater consideration in the interests of the industry. If we can get those amendments through, which is what the industry wants, the industry will be a lot happier and the legislation will be a lot more successful.

Mr Palaszczuk: We are a very consultative Government.

Mr COOPER: We will see. The Minister will have a chance to prove that when he studies the amendments and also listens to all points of view in the industry. There are elements of the industry that want the legislation. Obviously, they also want a decent length of time in which to be able to study it. That is especially the case with the growers, who are at the grassroots in the industry.

The industry has experienced some enormous problems over the past couple of years. The sugar price has been at a record low and there have been shocking seasonal conditions, with cyclones and floods. That has added to their problems. Recently, a rat outbreak has caused havoc throughout the cane industry. A combination of all of those factors has made their life extremely difficult and will continue to make it difficult into the future. We also face great problems in that Thailand, Brazil and many other countries are putting enormous pressure on our sugar industry. If ever there is a need for unity in the industry and for people to hang in tight, it is now while they work their way through these very difficult times. The Opposition will be working very closely with them.

We support the amendments relating to the chicken meat industry. I believe that the changes to the Chicken Meat Industry Committee Act reflected an agreed outcome between chicken growers and processors and also addressed the Trade Practices Act issue. That being the case, the amendments are supported by the coalition.

The amendments to the City of Brisbane Market Act 1960 provide the next step for the corporatisation of the Brisbane Market Authority. I note the Minister's assurance that the imposition of contractual terms on lessees at the Brisbane Market are consistent with the existing leases and are necessary to ensure its continued effective operation. I see the Minister nodding. The coalition supports those amendments.

The proposed amendments to the Fisheries Act 1994 address two very different issues and each warrants some comment. The first series of amendments relates to the introduction of a national docketing scheme to allow trace back of seafood. While at this stage the scheme will cover only abalone, it provides a platform for the certification of high-value seafood products. These amendments include Queensland in the national scheme, which will help in the policing of illegal poaching and marketing of abalone.

Australia's fisheries are an invaluable resource and provide a host of valuable products, abalone being just one of those. Regrettably, but not surprisingly, poaching and illegal trading have emerged as a growing problem in the abalone industry. These people have no regard for the sustainability of the resource. Although Queensland does not have an abalone industry, I understand that authorities believe that a considerable volume of abalone taken illegally from interstate is processed and sold in this State. This legislation will mean that Queensland plays its part in stamping out the illegal trade by providing for effective auditing and trace back.

These amendments also provide magistrates with the ability to issue monitoring warrants for fisheries inspectors to search places other than homes. The Opposition believes that this power is necessary for proper enforcement of the Act and is satisfied with the safeguard provisions attached to the issue of such warrants. The national docketing scheme will help to stamp out poaching and illegal trading of abalone and ensure the sustainable management of that resource, and the Opposition supports these amendments.

We have had recent first-hand experience in Queensland of the greed and destruction of illegal fishermen and seafood traders in relation to the poaching of prawns in Moreton Bay. On numerous occasions, I have urged the Minister to take action against the offenders. I simply urge him to act in time to avoid a repeat of the activity next season.

That brings me to the east coast trawling draft management plan, which I believe is imminent. Discussions with the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and the QFMA are proceeding reasonably well, as is the involvement of the QCFO and Sunfish. We, too, keep ourselves very well briefed from members of those organisations. It is a matter of extreme importance. As the Minister is well aware, that management plan is an opportunity for the Great Barrier Reef authority and the Federal Government to make inroads into the Queensland fishing industry. That is something that we do not want to see happen. I wish those discussions well because, as we all know, these things can drag on a bit too long sometimes, especially when jobs, industries and people's investments are at stake.

I understand that an enormous number of draft management plans are to be considered over the coming months. I realise what the Minister is indicating when he raises his eyes to the heavens; it is a very difficult industry in which to make everyone happy. There are something like 880,000 recreational

fishermen. We also have massive investment in the QCFO, the commercial side of operations, not to mention the jobs that are at stake. The Minister has to draw a line down the middle and try to make people as happy as possible while at the same time ensuring that we have viable, sustainable industries in the decades ahead.

The second series of amendments to the Fisheries Act relate to the protection of mangroves and marine plants, which are an integral part of the marine environment. As a refuge and breeding sanctuary for a host of fish species, mangrove and marine plant communities support our fisheries along the length of the Queensland coast. The Opposition acknowledges the importance of protecting these plants in light of constant pressures from development, clearing and so on. While in the main every attempt should be made to protect these species, there are occasions when clearing or pruning is necessary, for example, clearing drainage ditches in some of the sugarcane growing areas that are periodically invaded by mangroves to prevent drainage problems.

Opposition members have raised some concerns about the permit process for this type of mangrove pruning or clearing. I understand that there have been occasions when excessive delay in the issue of such a permit has caused considerable problems for land-holders. The DPI has advised us that the permanent process is being streamlined in consultation with groups such as canegrowers, and we welcome that. Again, it is a case of balance. I do ask the Minister to make sure that, when it comes to streamlining those things in order to prevent excessive delay, he remembers that canegrowers have a story to tell and a business to run. They must be able to get on and do that without suffering from excessive delays and nuisances.

There is another issue on which I would like further clarification from the Minister, and that is whether the grazing of salt couch by cattle constitutes an example of damaging a marine plant under the legislation and would therefore render coastal properties utilising this pasture in breach of the Act. I would also like an assurance from the Minister that the costs associated with these permits are an accurate reflection of the actual administrative costs of the permit and monitoring scheme and that these costs will be kept to a minimum. In the main, the Opposition supports the intent of these amendments to maintain and better protect mangrove and marine plant systems in coastal areas.

We also accept the importance placed on the retention of fish habitat by the fishing industry and their argument that the existing fines for unauthorised mangrove disturbance do not reflect that importance, particularly when compared with fines imposed for other illegal activities such as taking undersized fish. I caution the Minister, however, to ensure that the permit process is streamlined so that we avoid a situation in which people may be faced with heavy fines for necessary and legitimate clearing while pruning mangroves.

To my mind it is a commonsense thing, but sometimes commonsense does not prevail. Sometimes people who regard themselves as little tin gods go throwing their weight around, making life difficult for other people. That does not help anybody. I suppose if that happens it should be brought to the attention of the Minister and the Parliament by us, the people's representatives, so that any necessary amendments can be enacted.

In large part, the amendments to the Fruit Marketing Organisation Act 1923 bring the legislation which underpins the Queensland Fruit and Vegetable Growers—the representative organisation for the fruit and vegetable industries—into line with its current operation. The QFVG, formerly known as the Committee of Direction, or COD, is no longer involved in fruit and vegetable marketing activities and is now primarily the growers' representative organisation. The Opposition believes that it is therefore only appropriate to amend the Act accordingly.

The second tranche of amendments deal with the imposition of levies on certain fruit and vegetables and, specifically, a provision to retrospectively validate these levies. The Opposition shares the concerns of the Scrutiny of Legislation Committee in regard to this retrospectivity. However, we accept the Minister's explanation that the need for these amendments has arisen due to inadvertent administrative error and that the collection of these levies to date has been in good faith and has been used for the benefit of those fruit and vegetable growers. With the Minister's assurances, the Opposition supports these amendments.

The amendments to the Grain Industry (Restructuring) Act 1991 arise from another National Competition Policy review and will partially deregulate domestic grain trading while maintaining the statutory single desk selling of export barley. While the NCP review was the catalyst for these changes, I understand that they will nevertheless have the strong support of the grain industry. The deregulation of domestic grain trading is in keeping with the wishes of the industry to move away from the traditional marketing board and introduce greater marketing flexibility within the industry.

However, in regard to the marketing of export barley, the Opposition welcomes the retention of single desk selling until the proposed sunset date of 30 June 2002. The maintenance of this provision and the vesting powers of Grainco is important at least until other grain growing States decide the

future of their single desk selling provisions. I note the Minister's comments in his second-reading speech that he will continue to monitor the situation.

It is similarly prudent that Queensland's single desk provisions for export wheat are preserved until the review of the Commonwealth's Wheat Marketing Act 1989. The National Party has been a strong supporter of the single desk seller in the grain and sugar industries, and these provisions have provided for the development of strong, stable industries in the face of often corrupted world markets. On this basis and because of the support of the grain industry, the Opposition supports these amendments which preserve single desk selling for export barley and wheat.

The Opposition generally supports the amendments to the statutory accountability provisions of the grain Act. However, we agree with the recommendation of the Scrutiny of Legislation Committee that the application of the parliamentary commission Act to Grainco's residual powers be retained. I note that the Minister now intends to adopt that recommendation and move the amendment accordingly. The Opposition will support that amendment.

The Opposition supports the amendments to the Meat Industry Act 1993 which bring the Meat Industry Tribunal into line with other existing tribunals and streamline the appeal process. Recently we have seen very heavy increases in meat taxes—increases of up to 315%. I remind the Minister and Government members that the meat industry is not overflowing with wealth. It is a very difficult industry to manage. Often meatworks come to grief. We have seen that with Murgon and South Burnett Meatworks.

It is not good enough to just allow these operators to fall by the wayside, especially when assistance is given to others. Assistance of various sorts was given to the AMH and the ConAgra owned meatworks at Dinmore. Good luck to them if they do get a rail loading facility—that will assist them greatly—and other forms of assistance from this Government. A similar situation exists in relation to Cannon Hill. We welcome the further investment in the meat industry by Australian Country Choice. We know that it is a good firm and we wish it well. That does not mean to say that we should just forget about the farmers' cooperative at Murgon, which is a locally owned operation.

Again, we welcome the contribution of AMH and ConAgra, but we do not want that to be at the expense of Murgon and the South Burnett Meatworks. There are 600-odd jobs out there to be considered. We all know that they are important. We need that meatworks to bring about competition. If the industry is brought down to just a couple of major multinational companies, then we can imagine the amount of competition that will occur. That would have a very detrimental effect on the meat industry. We need to be very mindful that, as each player is taken out or goes down, we are increasingly at the mercy of the big boys, who can name their own price. There are all sorts of reasons to make every effort to support the South Burnett Meatworks. Its value to the community and district of Murgon, the jobs it provides and the competition it engenders in the market generally are all of major importance.

Recently I mentioned some matters relating to the dairy industry which I found rather interesting. The Minister would probably find them interesting also. While National Competition Policy might have brought about deregulation of the dairy industry in the beginning, the actions of the Victorians have really made that occur. Their own dairy farmers will suffer as a result. Some may even go out of business. I believe there are around 3,000 of them. Like lemmings, they will just go over the cliff. Someone thought it was a good idea at the time—probably Murray Goulburn of Bonlac. Processors will rule and will set the price. The consumer will pay more and the farmer will get less. A lot of them will go broke.

That will also happen in Queensland. There are about 1,650 dairy farmers in this State. They have been reorganised and restructured until the cows come home—pardon the pun. They have bent over backwards to do the right thing on every occasion, yet the change never stops. Every time the bar is raised, someone raises it a little higher. Now, thanks to the Victorians and their processors, we could lose a third of our 1,650 farmers. The Minister knows that. It will not be for the want of trying on the part of this Parliament, because we will back them to the hilt, but sometimes market forces can dislocate that effort. Therefore, the dairy industry is coming into some very difficult times once again.

I note that the Senate committee investigating the merits of dairy deregulation will consider holding a national farmer vote on the issue. It will be interesting to see if that goes ahead. As Democrats Senator John Woodley said, there is much contradiction between the industry and farmers on the issue of deregulation, with many farmers wanting to retain some form of regulation. We know that. Deregulation was forced upon them. It will be interesting to see if they actually go ahead and hold a plebiscite so that every dairy farmer can have his say. I would love to see what the Victorian dairy farmers say, because I do not think they have been given a say. I know the views of the Queensland dairy farmers.

Recently we have discussed regional forest agreements. We on this side of the House are concerned about the endless two-week delays. Every two weeks we are told that it will be another two

weeks. I worry about the importance the Government places on the forest agreement, because this has gone on for far too long. It has caused an enormous amount of angst, heartache and uncertainty in our timber towns. I urge the Deputy Premier to take a much greater interest in finalising the RFA, because it will not go away. The uncertainty must be removed and people must be given a time span over which they can plan with certainty for the future. The workers and all of those who have been involved in the forest industry for generations are very good managers. They know better than most how to run their forests. They run them well, successfully and with a view to the future. I believe that this Minister can use his good officers to ensure that the agreement is finalised.

I refer to the Primary Producers' Organisation and Marketing Act 1926. The Opposition agrees with the Minister that it is highly unlikely that another marketing board will ever be constituted in the form that the existing legislation provides for. We therefore support the repeal of all of those unused marketing provisions as proposed.

The proposed amendments regarding the operation of the Canegrowers organisation will facilitate a rewrite of the regulation and provide greater operational flexibility to that organisation. Given the support of the Canegrowers organisation for these changes and the nature of the changes, the Opposition supports these amendments also.

In conclusion, I thank officers from the Department of Primary Industries for the briefings given to me and to the coalition's primary industries Bills committee. I acknowledge the support given by the Minister. He has made very sure that we have had access to briefings, and we appreciate that. We know that that will continue.

I acknowledge the stakeholders we have been involved with in relation to this and other legislation. We need to get the very best advice and information if we are to make good decisions in this Parliament. We appreciate the input of those stakeholders who have actually gotten off their backsides and made sure that we have been informed properly and well. We look forward to that continuing. The Opposition will support these amendments.
