



Speech by

Mr TIM MULHERIN

MEMBER FOR MACKAY

Hansard 29 April 1999

MEAT INDUSTRY AMENDMENT STANDARD (No. 1) 1999
Disallowance of Statutory Instrument

Mr MULHERIN (Mackay—ALP) (8.40 p.m.): I rise to speak against the disallowance motion moved by the Opposition and to in turn highlight the Beattie Government's strong commitment to the meat industry in this State. This Government recognises the importance of the meat processing industry in Queensland. More than 15,000 Queenslanders are directly employed by the industry. It is Queensland's largest rural industry. It is an economic mainstay of many rural and regional communities across the State.

In recent years there have been a number of abattoir closures and consequent job losses in regional Queensland due to industry rationalisation. This Government has a strong commitment to jobs and last year the Deputy Premier and the Minister for Primary Industries unveiled a comprehensive strategy for the meat industry. The strategy included: the formation of a meat processing industry task force; the establishment of the Queensland meat processing development initiative to provide a single entry point for the industry to access Government funding of up to \$20m over three years; and confirmation that the Government would exit the meat processing industry and do so in a way that would enable all Queensland Abattoir Corporation contracts to be met. The Government's strategy aims to safeguard jobs, build sustainable new jobs, develop value-adding processes for the 21st century, develop a robust competitive processing sector, enhance our meat processing performance and attain world's best practice.

This Government's commitment to the meat processing industry is in stark contrast to the do-nothing approach of the former Borbidge administration. When it was in power, the former Borbidge Government refused to act. Its refusal to act was in spite of advice from its own Meat Processing Consultative Committee warning that the do-nothing approach could result in the closure of up to 17 abattoirs and the loss of 5,000 jobs in the next five years. The Borbidge Government had this report for more than four months and it did nothing.

The coalition believed shutting the QAC's doors and hoping for the best was good enough for Queensland's meat processing industry, a direct employer of more than 15,000 Queenslanders. In contrast, this Government moved swiftly on the report and put a comprehensive strategy in place. This strategy will allow Government and industry to work closely together to generate new opportunities and give fresh momentum to meat processing in Queensland.

This Government's commitment to the meat industry also means that it is committed to the Queensland Livestock and Meat Authority. The primary function of the QLMA is to ensure that the wholesomeness and integrity of meat is maintained by a quality assurance accreditation system, provided under the Meat Industry Act 1993. This quality assurance system, introduced under the former Goss Government, firmed Queensland's position as a national leader in meat safety. In fact, Queensland's lead has been followed by other States such as Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia.

Quality assurance is critical to the meat industry. The Beattie Government is committed to providing the highest possible meat safety standards. This Government believes meat safety is too important to ever be compromised. A high standard of meat safety is in the best interests of

consumers, and it is in the best interests of the meat industry. The coalition refuses to accept that fact. When it was in Opposition during the Goss years, the coalition tried to undermine the efforts of industry and the Government to achieve the highest possible standards.

In February 1995, my predecessor and then Minister for Primary Industries, Ed Casey, was forced to respond to yet another shameful slur on meat safety from the coalition. It is important to note what Ed Casey said on that occasion. He said—

"The first consideration of the Queensland Government is public health and the second is the protection of the reputation of our product on intensely competitive international and local markets."

That is the difference between Labor and the coalition on meat safety. Unfortunately, the hard work of our meat industry and the Goss Government on meat safety has been undermined by the Borbidge Government. It was undermined so comprehensively by the coalition Government that, in its final weeks before losing office, the then Minister for Primary Industries, the member for Hinchinbrook, was advised that the situation at the QLMA could have serious trade implications for Queensland meat both internationally and domestically. Bearing in mind that advice, did the member for Hinchinbrook shore up funding for the QLMA? Of course he did not. Did the warning of the closure of 17 abattoirs and the loss of 5,000 jobs in five years stir the coalition into action? Of course it did not. This Government has inherited a disgraceful legacy in the meat industry and we are addressing it.

Mr Johnson: Do you understand how the meat industry works?

Mr MULHERIN: Yes, I do.

Mr Johnson: You are talking about big abattoirs. We are talking about what is happening with country butchers.

Mr MULHERIN: At the end of the day, if the quality is not maintained it will damage our international reputation. We only have to look at what happened at Garibaldi's to see how that has affected smallgoods. We are addressing it not only in the best interests of the 15,000 Queenslanders employed directly and the thousands more employed indirectly in the meat industry, but for all Queenslanders.

I return to the previous Government's own Meat Processing Consultative Committee report, Meat Processing Industry at the Crossroads. This was its own committee. It included two members of the then QLMA board—its chairman, Mr Richie Goldup, and board member Mr Bob MacLeod, the executive director of the National Meat Association, Queensland division.

The member for Surfers Paradise announced his Cabinet's approval to form this committee following the closure of Nippon Meats' Bowen meatworks in the Mackay region in November 1997. It is interesting to note that, with De-Anne Kelly and representatives of the Cattlemen's Union and the meatworkers union, I led a delegation to the then Premier at the Community Cabinet meeting in Mackay and lobbied the Premier to set up this task force. The only reason he acted was that, when he came to Mackay at that time, Borthwicks had closed down the Bakers Creek plant. The Borbidge Government did not go anywhere near the—

Mr Johnson: Why did they close them down?

Mr MULHERIN: Why did they not go to Bowen? The meatworks there was closed for nearly 12 months before the coalition even looked at doing something for Bowen. We have acted.

At the time of the announcement, the task force was due to report back no later than 31 January last year. It reported back in early February last year. In late March, the then Primary Industries Minister, the member for Hinchinbrook, told the Courier-Mail that the report's recommendations would be considered by his department and the offices of the then Premier and the then Treasurer. They considered it. They considered that the best course of action was inaction.

It is important to note what the committee said in one of the opening sections of its report entitled Facing Reality: Executive Summary and Recommendations. It states—

"The committee believes that the Queensland Government can be positive in its responses to problems facing the processing sector and is optimistic that the Government will take a favourable view of the committee's recommended strategy which follows."

The fact of the matter is that the former Borbidge Government ignored the whole report, just as it ignored meat safety. It is obvious that the previous coalition Government did not care about meat safety, nor did it appear too concerned about the impact such an attitude would have on this State.

Now, back in Opposition, the coalition refuses to talk about meat safety. It wants to talk about everything but meat safety. Members of the coalition have focused much of their time and energy on the QLMA administrator, Bob McCarthy, who was appointed by this Government following the dismissal of the QLMA board. Mr McCarthy's brief was simple: ensure that the QLMA was sustainable. He

advised the Government what it needed to do to ensure that the QLMA was sustainable—in other words, fix up the mess the former Borbidge Government created.

I want to focus on the issue of meat safety and the meat industry in this State, but I will indulge the coalition and talk about Bob McCarthy. The member for Crows Nest claims Mr McCarthy is a Labor lackey because he served under the current Minister for Primary Industries for a short period after this Government won office. How does a Labor lackey serve under former Deputy Prime Minister Doug Anthony, ex-Federal Primary Industries Minister John Anderson and one-time New South Wales National Party Leader Ian Armstrong? Those men are the triple A package of National Party icons. They are the best the members opposite have got to offer and Mr McCarthy worked for them.

But the real problem with what the member for Crows Nest has been saying is in fact that Mr McCarthy served under the Borbidge Government. He was chairman of the Queensland Fisheries Management Authority's Trawl Management Advisory Council. The fact of the matter is that Bob McCarthy is well respected in industry circles. His expertise has been sought by both sides of politics because he is a leading economic and financial management consultant who has extensive commercial experience in the grain, coal, live cattle, meat, sugar and fertiliser industries. Mr McCarthy has had several years' experience in the meat processing industry, both in Australia and abroad. His services have been sought by the World Bank.

I briefly detail some of Mr McCarthy's experience for the benefit of the members of this House. Mr McCarthy served as a senior agricultural trade negotiator for the Federal Government, primarily responsible for meat access arrangements for Australian exporters into the United States, Japan and Europe. Mr McCarthy oversaw the Australian Wheat Board's \$3 billion marketing and shipping operations. Mr McCarthy has been appointed to senior board positions in a number of Government and private sector organisations, including chairman of the Australian Meat and Livestock Industry Council and chairman of the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation. To top it all off, Mr McCarthy is a grazier.
