



Speech by

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FOOD PRODUCTION [SAFETY] BILL

Mr FELDMAN (Caboolture—ONP) (2.30 p.m.): I rise to speak to the Food Production (Safety) Bill. Like many speakers before me, I have some concerns with respect to this legislation. As the honourable member for Lockyer said before, we will be moving an amendment to a portion of this legislation at the Committee stage of the Bill.

Mr Palaszczuk: There's no need to move that amendment. Your amendment is going to constrict the length of time that the Bill provides for.

Mr FELDMAN: We will debate that when we get to the Committee stage.

I have many concerns about the legislation and the way in which it will impact on primary producers, especially those in my electorate. I will probably speak to Part 5 of the Bill. Those requirements will severely impact on the ability of many of these primary producers to actually stay in business. At present the vast majority of farmers and graziers are holding on to their farms and businesses by their fingernails. There is certainly no fat left. In fact, it has been many years since there was any fat left in primary production. Every time there is a 1c increase in the cost of production, there must be 1c shaved somewhere else. Farmers and fishermen alike are caught in the jaws of a financial vice. They have input costs such as diesel, chemicals, seed, fertiliser and fishing nets that they simply cannot do without. When a further financial impost such as this comes along, the primary producer has to decide what cost to shave so that he and his family and workers can continue to eat and work.

What tends to happen initially is that the purchase of machinery and equipment for replacement or upgrading is delayed indefinitely or abandoned altogether. The tactic works for a while, but as the old equipment gets older and more tired, it loses efficiency. It breaks down more often, usually at critical times, which in turn leads to production losses and inefficiencies. It is also likely that during this time of financial stress other cost-saving measures will be used, such as decreasing the amount of fertiliser applied or perhaps reducing the sowing rate or trying to get by with one less pass of the plough or one less application of pesticide. While these measures and others will reduce costs in the short term, they are all self-defeating as they will also reduce production and therefore income. Meanwhile, the ageing machinery costs more to operate as breakdowns require expensive replacement parts, the costs of which can never adequately be recovered.

Before long, the vicious cycle develops where it costs more to operate the old equipment than it would have cost to buy new replacements. Unfortunately, by this time the trade-in value of the old gear is so low that it is impossible to afford the upgrade, and before long, there is an ad in the classifieds section of the local paper notifying potential buyers of an upcoming clearance sale. The next scene in this all-too-common sequence is the gathering of friends, neighbours and bargain hunters to pick over the bones of what was once a stable family business.

This sequence is played out over and over again throughout this State as family farm after family farm goes to the wall, in large part because of a decision made by this anti-bush Government. This legislation will significantly increase the cost of production of virtually every food item in Queensland. The member for Warrego spoke of this when he was talking about accreditation. He said that it would not bring an extra brass razoo to production, especially in connection with wool. But it is the same all over the State. These imposts and these in-costs have to be taken up at some end of the

scale. This is just one of the many big sticks being used to bludgeon our primary producers into oblivion.

Currently our farmers and our fishermen are struggling to survive under the enormous financial impost of free trade, the GST and fuel prices, just to mention a few. If this Government had a shred of feeling for the people of rural and regional Queensland, it would be championing the cause of fair trade as opposed to destructive free trade in support of all workers and small employers in Queensland. It would also not have caved in to the Federal Government on the GST, and it would have done a better job of negotiating for a fair deal for Queenslanders in relation to fuel excise. But as we all know, this Government does not care one jot for the wellbeing of Queensland businesses or Queensland workers. It is inwardly focused and cares only about greasing the right palms to ensure that it stays in Government.

This is just another example of what I would say is electoral rorting, and on a grand scale. The Minister and the Government have misled and confused their employers, the people of Queensland. It has practised the practised art of propagandists all over the world: the art of telling lies and half-truths so often and so consistently that normal, sane, thinking people start to really believe what is being dished out to them. This is not exactly the type of electoral rorting that we have been hearing about lately, but it is the sort that is destroying rural communities over and over again.

When we look at the word "rort", we see that it can be either a verb or a noun. It is a very versatile little word with lots of meanings: trick; fraud; deceit; it can mean a wild party; someone engaged in a sharp practice; and to rig. That is what we see in some of the aspects of this Bill, because people are being snowed into what they think this Bill is actually conjuring up.

We all know that a need exists to protect the consumers of food, but we do not want to see people manipulated and pushed where they should not go. They should not be manipulated. This Government is quite good at that. Safe food will eventually take over. The idea of having safe food production is giving everyone out there a fair go to be able to produce it. We on this side of the House and certainly in City Country Alliance do not want to see farmers disadvantaged when it comes to safe food production. In response to what some people believe is being pushed over them, they have come up with little phrases which typify the actions of the Government. One that has been mentioned to me is: I rort, therefore I govern. Some of that probably does have a truthful ring to it. But only this Government has turned that rorting into an art form.

I apologise for digressing somewhat from the matter at hand, but this Government provides so many distractions to draw us away from the real business of governing that it is sometimes difficult to resist having a passing shot at some of the things it does. Returning to the matter at hand, our primary producers are not in a position to pass on their cost increases to consumers. Virtually all their produce is perishable. They are, of necessity, price takers rather than price makers. This, unfortunately, ensures that the producer is at the mercy of the buyer, particularly when the buyer has the option of buying from overseas if the price of Australian produce is not to his liking. All that will happen once this legislation is in place in Queensland is that primary producers will have the mythical level playing field tilted just a few more degrees in favour of the imported goods. It will not be long before that mythical level playing field is in fact vertical, and when that happens, there will be nothing left to govern.

How long will it take the dim-witted members on the other side of the House to realise that this will drive this State into oblivion, and what will be left for their children? Surely they are not so short-sighted and selfish that they cannot see the mess that they are destined to leave behind them. I can understand that they have no concern for themselves, as they will mostly retire from this place on huge pensions, but that will not help their grandchildren. I implore members on both sides of this House to give some thought to the future plight of their children and their grandchildren when they make these political decisions.

If the Queensland Government has a genuine concern about the quality and safety levels of the current food supply and wishes to implement new standards to improve those levels, then the Government should be prepared to pay the cost of implementing those changes. That is right; the principle of the user pays should indeed be applied here. This Government loves to apply the user pays principle whenever it means that it can squeeze our rural and regional communities just that little bit harder, so why will it not apply the same principle in this situation? If people want these unnecessary changes to the rules, then they should be asked to pay for them. Every farmer, every fisherman and every grazier who, because of this legislation is saddled with extra compliance costs, must be compensated in full for the extra outlays—including his own time.

This Government must put its money where its mouth is and fork out the money to meet the extra compliance costs. After all, part of the reason for these changes is to do away with the current system of monitoring that the Minister refers to as prescriptive. Prescriptive refers to a system where the authorities put in place a set of rules and then enforce them. This is a format that has worked for many years but now the Government wants to change a system that does away with Government inspectors

and the like. They will be replaced with "an outcome-based approach that places responsibility on food businesses to minimise food safety risks in their production and handling processes". The Explanatory Notes go on to state—

"Under this regime, Government will increasingly assume an approval and audit role for preventive food safety."

In other words, this Government is about to abrogate its responsibilities to provide adequate inspection services by forcing primary producers to carry the load. Under the old system a primary producer was considered to be doing the right thing until he was found to have committed an offence.

We have heard the other speakers talk about the dairy industry where perhaps some dairies did need an upgrade, but those dairies were inspected. If they needed that upgrade to bring about a food safety measure, that was done; they were inspected and they were rectified. The anomalies that were found were fixed up.

These farmers now have to decide what will be the right thing for them to be able to comply with the provisions of this Bill. They will have a great impost placed upon them to set standards that probably, in some instances, will be way over the limit just because they have a fear of prosecution.

They should be presumed innocent until proven guilty. Everybody recognises that as a fundamental rule of law. I think that what we are doing here is placing an unfair burden on a primary producer rather than having inspections carried out. I believe that this legislation reverses the onus of proof so that every primary producer in this State will now have to put in place those expensive systems to prove his innocence, really, in advance. I do not think that there is any fairness in that concept. I know, as many of the other speakers have already said, that we have an onus of responsibility when we are producing food, but that onus goes right along the whole level.

If I can pick up on something that the member for Tablelands said about supermarkets, where fresh produce is put out for display and people are walking around touching it, picking it up and feeling it, and there is—

Mr Palaszczuk: That area is a health issue. It's got nothing to do with this legislation.

Mr FELDMAN: It is, but we are bringing up situations where people are saying that anyone who gets ill or sick in those circumstances does so because of what was done by the primary producer. We seem to be pushing that onus and that responsibility back on the primary producer by saying it was his fault that somehow the production mechanisms that were in place were the root cause of that occurring, rather than looking at a lot of other aspects of health. It is a health responsibility. However, we are pushing the blame for those illnesses that are picked up back onto the primary producer. We do not see that as being fair or equitable in any circumstances.

As we said, we will be looking at those amendments that are coming before the Committee and we will pursue the one that we have foreshadowed for reasons that we will highlight as we deal with the clauses. We will be supporting the majority of those amendments because we believe that this Bill has not got it quite right and that these things should be fixed up now for the benefit of everybody who will have the extra cost or the extra burden placed on them by the rules and regulations provided under this Bill.
