



Speech by
**Hon. BRIAN
LITTLEPROUD**

MEMBER FOR WESTERN DOWNS

Hansard 18 October 2000

FOOD PRODUCTION [SAFETY] BILL

Hon. B. G. LITTLEPROUD (Western Downs—NPA) (5.14 p.m.): I welcome the opportunity to speak to the Food Production (Safety) Bill 2000. I do not intend to restate the comments already made today, except to note that there seems to be general agreement that there is a responsibility on the part of Governments of the day right across the nation to ensure that the food that people have access to is safe. I will make a few comments about how we go about ensuring that. This parallels my experiences with the Environmental Protection Act and associated regulations and the way they were put in place.

In May of this year I attended a meeting in Chinchilla. John Mickel represented the Government at that meeting of the Queensland Country Meat Processors Association. These people are the small processors of fresh meat across Queensland. They have been part and parcel of the QLMA for quite some time. The experiences of that group of people are worth considering. Though we can go about things with the best of intentions and get the best of advice, we ought not shut out people who have practical experience. I will go through a few points that these people raised.

John Mickel made an announcement on behalf of the Government that it would meet half the cost of microbiological testing in all the shops and slaughter yards of the meat processors across Queensland. That announcement was welcomed. But the argument is that the community benefits from good quality food; if the community benefits then the community as a whole should contribute part of the cost. It had been argued for a long time by this organisation of small meat processors that they were being asked to carry all the costs in their line of production. If the benefits are felt by the whole community, then the whole community should contribute through the Government. I think the Minister has made some sort of acknowledgment that there is a role for the Government to contribute, because the whole community benefits. I think those involved in all levels of production of food are going to put the same sort of argument.

The member for Crows Nest spoke about the poor level of viability in primary production. Primary producers cannot carry those sorts of extra costs on their own because they do not have the capacity to bear them and they do not have the capacity to pass them on. Governments have a responsibility to act on behalf of the community and pay on behalf of the community.

The next thing they raised was that they could recognise that some of their members were complying extremely well with all of the conditions of Q-Safe and that others were not. It was agreed that the QLMA would separate the annual licence fee and the audit fee. Everyone agreed that there has to be a licence, but the number of times a processor has to be audited varies depending on the performance of the individual processing plant.

That is similar to the experience I had when I was Environment Minister. I took over a set of regulations and an Act that was put together by Molly Robson, a Minister in the Goss Government. There was uproar because the people in the workplace were adamant that all the costs and things associated with complying with the Act were over the top. It is on record that I put a moratorium on that. I got together a group of advisers—people in industry and people with expertise—and we went through it all. I brought in new legislation and new regulations. The sky has not fallen in. The current Minister for the Environment has not changed the things I put in place. I think we proved that by listening to people out there in the workplace we can still reach high standards but in other ways, rather than by adopting

world's best practice. We have to have some ear for what is practical and what is possible. I ask the Minister to take that into account.

These people also said, "The fellows who do not perform well have to be expected to pay more. The blokes who have a good show should not be audited too often. They get away with it because they look after themselves—self-regulation."

Mr Rowell: I think you wrote to me at that time.

Mr LITTLEPROUD: I wrote to the member for Hinchinbrook about this. One of the recommendations of that meeting—I wrote to the member for Hinchinbrook as shadow Minister—was that the country processors wanted the QLMA to focus on outcome standards because small works could get higher quality results by doing things differently from the larger works. They say, "Come and see the standard of the product we put out and judge us on that. Don't judge us on the process we go through and all the things we have to do."

They argued pretty strongly—I thought it was a valid argument—that the conditions were written to suit a large processor, where there would be 200 or 300 people in the work chain. Then there are the country processors who have maybe only two workmen out there in the slaughterhouse. The quality of the meat coming out the other end is the same. The small processor does not have to have all the steps in the processing. They said, "It will be fairer if you just judge us on the quality of the food that we send on from there, rather than on whether we have all the steps that the big fellows such as ConAgra might have."

I thought that was a pretty valid argument. I will make a comparison. Again, going back to my day when I was trying to make the Environment Protection Act work, I put in place an advisory council. I wrote to all the various industry organisations and the environmental groups saying, "Send along a representative." Those representatives used to look at all the legislation and give me advice on it. I had appointed to that council a fellow from Dalby, who was a small metal fabricator. One day he said to me, "Brian, I am the only bloke there who is an owner-operator. All the other people who have been sent along by industry organisations are highly qualified, but salaried people." He said further, "It is interesting that when we start debating things, invariably I can come up with a point of view that is very much oriented to the bloke who is an owner rather than being oriented to the theory and the academic training that is necessary."

I impress on the Minister that I think that it is imperative that, when this Safe Food Production QLD gets up and going, there is input from the small operators who are meeting the standards but doing it in different ways, that judgments are made on an outcomes basis, and that regard is given to these people who have had a lot of experience. Although those people may take short cuts or employ more efficient ways, they should not be disregarded if their methods look different or a bit shoddy, because the product has to be judged on an outcomes basis.

The other thing that I impressed on these people—and I think that the Minister will probably receive the same sort of pressure from the various food processing groups—is that there is a necessity on their part to make sure that they are on any advisory committees. Otherwise, the type of advice coming forward can be skewed. There are well-intentioned people who have been in the really big places and have received plenty of qualifications, but they have not been right at the coalface trying to make a quid, trying to meet standards. So I suggest to those people that they should press the Minister to make sure that they get representation on Q-Safe.

Without prolonging the debate any further, I want to say that I think that we all support the idea of having these standards right across Australia. I understand the need for the Queensland Government to play its part in that by introducing its own legislation. However, it is just how we go about it. Although we should be very careful that we meet the standards, I think that sometimes there are ways in which we can go about doing that in a better way than those proposed from a purely academic corner.
