



Speech by

Mrs D. PRATT

MEMBER FOR BARAMBAH

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COMPETITION POLICY REFORM [QUEENSLAND] BILL

Mrs PRATT (Barambah—IND) (10.15 p.m.): National Competition Policy has been described as a "kick in the guts" for small towns, for consumers, for farmers, for the environment and for the regional areas of Australia. The effect on our dairy industry is, and will be, devastating. The day when we saw milk prices in the shops rise to above the price of the equivalent volume in Coke should be held as a day of mourning for all Australians.

It is clear that the winners from dairy deregulation are not the consumers or the farmers or the already struggling regional centres. This headlong rush to deregulate appears to be solely because, as I am often told, "It is inevitable." Why is it inevitable? Where is the questioning of the rationale for this huge transformation of what was, as in the case of the dairy industry, an already profitable rural industry?

The arguments in both State and Federal Parliaments seem to revolve around the "it's inevitable" thinking process and the size of the compensation package. What of the industry and the environment? There are those who believe that prices to farmers will continue to decline, forcing them to the "get big or get out" scenario. Recently, an announcement was made for a 5,000-cow mega-dairy on 142 hectares in the Riverina. I grew up on a dairy farm. I know that the environment could not be sustained under those conditions and that the milkers—cows, for those who do not know— would not be able to graze. The milkers would have to become like feedlot animals, or perhaps like battery hens.

This "get big or get out" philosophy is a by-product of NCP. We are told that our industries are being sacrificed for NCP, global markets and commercial realities. NCP can be, and is, a killer and it has produced many casualties. The South Burnett Meatworks and its 417 workers are casualties, as are the 230 Evans Deakin employees, the estimated 460 workers who will lose their jobs from the Queensland gold sector as uneconomic mines close down, the sugar industry and the dairy industry.

NCP will continue to harvest casualties. We are talking about full-time jobs. We are told that the Queensland economy is booming. Recently, the Courier-Mail reported that 2,900 jobs were created in Queensland in February, but that 2,700 of those jobs were part-time. I would not describe that as an improvement. I would not say that that is an indication that Queensland is booming.

Who wants National Competition Policy? Correspondence I have received and conversations I have had have shown me that very few people want NCP—not in the dairy industry, not in many other businesses and industries, and not in rural and regional areas.

The message must be getting through to Mr Borbidge and the coalition for in the Courier-Mail we saw an article referring to this very debate. The article was entitled "Coalition split on policy". Mr Borbidge, the Leader of the Opposition, is quoted as saying—

"The National Party would support a Private Members' Bill put up by MP Peter Prenzler."

The Leader of the Opposition has apparently decided that, although this Bill will probably be defeated tonight, it is advantageous to his party which has lost an enormous amount of support in the electorate. It is necessary that Mr Borbidge's party listens to the people in rural and regional Queensland who have been banging their heads against brick walls in an attempt to be heard.

What these people are trying to tell their MPs is that what is good for the metropolitan areas is not necessarily good for the rural and regional areas. We see so often that city-based bureaucrats and Governments, with more city-based MPs, are dictating what they believe, or theorise, is better for them and not necessarily for rural and regional Queensland.

A quote in a local regional newspaper by a Federal Liberal MP in answer to a question put to him by a constituent is very revealing. The question put to him was: would he represent the wishes of the electorate which actually opposed this MP's party's stance on a particular issue? The reported reply of the MP was that the party knew what was best. The people are sick of this yes-man attitude displayed by our politicians, and I congratulate Mr Borbidge on being aware of the continuing disquiet in rural and regional Queensland. It does not matter if it is purely self-interest that gets an MP listening to his electorate; maybe it will become a habit, the yes-man attitude will go and these MPs will slowly grow a backbone and stand up for the people out there in their electorates.

I refer to a speech given by Senator Woodley in October 1999—

"There is no doubt that there are commercial pressures coming from large processors. I am disappointed that there is not more political will to confront those market forces which are so destructive of farmers' incomes and rural communities ... these market forces are National Competition Policy, global market and commercial realities. I am concerned that we, as politicians, put ourselves forward to represent rural communities, and then we have to say that there are forces we cannot resist. One then has to ask the question, if that is so, if we are unable to resist forces which are driving a process of degradation of rural communities, surely we should question whether we should put ourselves forward."

We should all ask that question of ourselves. All things should not be judged as being inevitable. NCP can be put on hold if we have the will to do it—if not forever, at least until a broad public inquiry finds that it should go ahead for the benefit of the nation, not as is clearly stated by Senator Woodley, because politicians do not have the will to resist commercial pressures.

I have studied in Hansard the speeches of every member who has spoken on this Bill and I have learned many things. One of those things is that there appears to be very little give and take on this matter. There has to be give and take on this issue. Recently, I read the following statement—

"The philosophy of National Competition Policy is sound, but its broad brush application is neither sensible nor supportable."

Anyone who looks at this issue with a mind uncluttered by party politics, a nature free of greed for the almighty dollar and with a fairness of heart would have to agree. There are many who have stated the same. During the previous sitting the member for Gladstone, in her contribution to this Bill, quoted many comments by persons who are more learned and experienced on this issue than I am. I believe that those comments are worth repeating, because it has been a long time and people may have forgotten them. One quote was from a review initiated as a result of the efforts of the National Party. It states—

"The commission's own draft report recognises the fact that big business and metropolitan areas are the major beneficiaries of National Competition Policy. What is not so plainly stated is the fact that regional and rural areas and small business are bearing most of the cost and hardship associated with the implementation of NCP."

The detrimental effects of the NCP on small rural towns such as those in the Barambah electorate are very evident. These towns are too small to absorb the blows that NCP throws their way, resulting in a domino effect which impacts on every business, every individual and every facility in the town. To those members of this House who have never resided in a small town long enough to know, I will describe what happens when the local bank branch closes. When a bank is closed, the accounts are transferred. In the case of my local bank, the accounts were transferred to branches in two nearby towns. The accounts of small investors were transferred to the Nanango branch, which is 15 to 20 minutes away, depending on just how fast one drives. The larger investor and business accounts were transferred to the Kingaroy branch, which is 40 to 60 minutes away, depending on one's speed. Many of the residents are now forced to travel to their bank.

Mr Feldman: Using premium petrol at 81c a litre.

Mrs PRATT: Exactly. When one lives in the bush, petrol at 81c a litre adds up. Therefore, whilst in a bigger town, people decide to take the opportunity to get a few things—perhaps a new dress, groceries, magazines, maybe a hairdo. Because of the devastating effects that this was having on local business, eventually a local businessman decided to put in EFTPOS to try to stop the people going out of town for their purchases. However, it was too late. The cost of installing the EFTPOS service to this man's business was not small. Although people were happy to use the facility, they still went out of town to do their shopping, because it had now become a habit. Gradually, the local dress shop closed

down. So, too, did the hairdresser. Other non-essential businesses followed suit. The mums, dads and kids left town to find alternative employment.

Because of this transfer of population, the school suffered for want of numbers. Therefore, one teacher was transferred. With the families moving, the preschool did not have enough numbers to go on. So it was threatened with closure. The doctor retired, but no doctor wants to replace him because the town is too small to support a doctor. The families who left town left at a price. They were thankful to sell their house, and they accepted a much lower price for their house than it was worth. They thought themselves extremely lucky to have found a buyer. The older people have no prospects of employment. They cannot afford to sell their homes at a lower price and buy another house in another town. Therefore, they are prisoners in their homes in that small town.

I see this happening in my electorate, so I know that it is fact. As I stated earlier, the small communities cannot absorb the devastating effect of National Competition Policy. I think back to the time when I read through the Hilmer report and now I think to myself, "What would it be like to take Fred Hilmer with me down the streets of these small towns in rural Queensland and ask him if what he saw there this very day is what he had in mind when he presented his ideas to the world?" I often wonder whether those who endorsed his ideas, actively promoted them and believed in them would still want to proceed down the same path, or would they opt to rectify a situation that they had not perceived could happen?

One of the major concerns of NCP is that its very name, National Competition Policy, defies what appears to happen in reality. We appear to be getting less competition in many industries, particularly the banking and supermarket industries, than we had in pre National Competition Policy times. Although the smaller supermarkets are fighting like crazy to stay afloat, they are slowly being swallowed up or pushed out of the market by the likes of Woolworths.

Although many would oppose protectionism, I for one would endorse it. I have worked in the retail industry and I have been a member of charitable organisations. I know exactly which businesses in these small towns are generous to a fault and which ones reach into their pockets time and time again to find a little funding for all the ventures that are going on. They get called on over and over and over again.

Mr Feldman: They've got a heart for their communities.

Mrs PRATT: They certainly do have a heart for their community. The names of the businesses that are operated by those people who give money do not start with a "W", as in Woolworths; they are the battlers in our area.

We often hear the statements that small business keeps the country afloat and small business is the major employer. Has that situation changed? I do not believe it has. So why is there this constant ideology of get big or get out? Why have we embraced so many concepts that are targeting and destroying small business? National Competition Policy is not Queensland friendly.

It would appear from reading Hansard that speakers agree that NCP has done untold damage throughout the State. It would also appear that speakers from all parties— National, Liberal, Labor, the CCAQ—and the Independents—have concerns. It is necessary for this entire Parliament to work together to sort out the mess. Although in some areas there have been major benefits from the NCP, in other areas the cost to families and industries has been horrific.

It has been stated that a review of the effects of National Competition Policy on the delivery of services and employment will take place in April 2000. I can only hope that, in that review, the effects of this policy on rural areas will be given due consideration and perhaps some consideration and leeway can be given to communities that have smaller populations so that the social and economic impact of NCP can be reduced.

During the previous debate on this Bill reference was made to a zonal system that was put in place to protect local governments. Perhaps that zonal system could be carried a little further and apply to small communities. It is often the case that many of us embrace what is perceived to be a great idea when it is first mooted. Many things look great on paper and in theory should, as many of our greatest academic minds will attest, work. However, they do not. Most of us realise that what works in theory very rarely works when put in practice. This is one of those times. For rural Queensland, National Competition Policy is a mistake—a mistake which can be rectified if the people within these walls have the will to do so.

As the member for Gregory stated, it is time to admit that National Competition Policy was a mistake and apologise for much of the hurt that has resulted from its implementation. It would be wonderful if all members in this Parliament could go out further west than the ranges and see exactly what the effect has been on those communities. The Premier said in this House that he had been to the bush and on further explanation that he had actually been to Ipswich. That has never, ever ceased to make me wonder.

Mr FELDMAN: He saw the burning from 40,000 feet.

Mrs PRATT: He did, didn't he? I would ask this Parliament to work in unison to revisit this concept. Queensland is not a beneficiary of this policy. She is not the beneficiary that it was hoped she would be. We have seen over the past 20 months more marches against this Parliament than there have been in a long, long time.

The people of Queensland are hurting and hurting badly. Industries are hurting and closing their doors. Queensland is hurting. I get asked every day: "Who on earth is running this country? Who on earth is running this State?" If members look at it through the eyes of the dairy industry, the sugar industry and other rural industries, or through the eyes of the retailers and the Evans Deakin workers, they will see who they believe is running the country, and it is not Government; it is big business.

I listened to the debate on this Competition Policy Reform (Queensland) Repeal Bill and I heard a lot of argument for argument's sake. I have heard a lot of inane interjections, which eventuate when you get this "his side, my side" mentality. In this debate, as in all debates in this House, there should be only one side and that is Queensland's side. It is with that in mind that I ask all members to work with Queensland's best interests at heart. When we vote on this Bill let us send out the message that Queensland will not succumb, that she will not sacrifice her industries, her small business and her people to what has become a flawed concept that other States and the Federal Government do not have the courage to oppose. Let us send out the message that we will not follow blindly, that we can stand on our own two feet. I ask the members of this House to let Queensland stand up and be counted, for we are strong enough.
