



Speech by

Mrs D. PRATT

MEMBER FOR BARAMBAH

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FOOD PRODUCTION [SAFETY] BILL

Mrs PRATT (Barambah—IND) (12.50 p.m.): Although the Food Production (Safety) Bill has the support of both sides of the House, I must confess that I have concerns about it. Most speakers have covered a lot of aspects associated with the Bill. To avoid repetition, I would like to approach this from the aspect of the costs and the effects on agriculture in general. I cannot but note that the burden of cost is once again being placed squarely on the shoulders of the farmer. Governments have gradually heaped cost upon cost on the producer, until loss of viability has become a reality for many. Adherence to this legislation is another impost on Queensland's rural producers.

The approach of this State Government and the Federal Government seems to be in conflict with the ideas and philosophies of the rest of the world. In the marketplace that this State Government and the Federal Government have created for rural land-holders, sustainability has now become questionable. Our farmers are independent. Although in need of assistance they will often be heard to say, "We do not want handouts from Government." They say this because they are made to feel like failures when they are put in the position in the marketplace where they cannot win.

There is no level playing field under economic rationalism, which ignores the lack of a perfect market. Economic rationalism, which ignores the irrationality of people and Governments, is flawed. Farmers in the rest of the world are often amazed at the assertion by Australian farmers that they do not want handouts. There are hardly any farmers in the world who do not receive some Government assistance, and those countries whose Governments do not offer assistance are not economically sound. The average EU beef farmer receives approximately 70% of his yearly income in the form of a cheque from the Government. Farmers in England, Holland, Denmark, North America, Japan, Korea and China are all heavily subsidised, and there are others. It was stated by the great Canadian economist J. K. Galbraith when speaking on Government involvement in agriculture—

"In the modern economic world agriculture, with all its problems, is outside general economic comprehension."

He is right. Galbraith has advised four US Presidents and has claimed that one of the greatest factors in the US domination of the world economy has been its fostering of agriculture. Conversely, he believes that Russia's neglect of agriculture was the main reason for the collapse of that country.

One has to ask what is Australia's future, when we take into consideration the lack of emphasis that both State and Federal Governments place on our agricultural sector. This year's Australian budget for agriculture saw the smallest percentage ever for farmers—less than 0.001% of the Budget. This is a drop in moneys allocated to the agriculture industry of 90% over 20 years.

The Australian Federal Budget is about \$120 billion—enough to pay out \$58 billion in welfare, \$2 billion in multiculturalism and \$1.4 billion to Aborigines. That does not include the \$1.5 billion to \$2 billion land fund, whose interest—that is roughly \$20m—buys any good freehold land for sale each year for the Aborigines. So it is not as if the Government has no money. It just has to have the desire to direct it in productive areas. We in this place make the rules and regulations that affect the various industries outside, which are continually required to pick up the price of compliance, often to the point of throwing their hands in the air and walking off their farms. The member for Southport outlined the costs faced by the dairy industry and the hardships that follow.

It is acknowledged that the frightening increase in salinity is a national issue for every Australian. That is a major reason it is time for Governments to transfer money to land-holders. Perhaps it would be in Australia's best interests to introduce a rural living wage, as exists in Europe. Very few people currently on farms would encourage their children to take on the family farm. Money worries, isolation from society and the ever-increasing paperwork do nothing to encourage the continuation of small holdings of agriculture.

According to ABARE, the average beef producer has run at a loss for the past 14 years. The tariff protection of the USA has been an ongoing problem for Australian producers in many areas of agriculture, and it is becoming worse. China is fast becoming a major player in pork, sheepmeat, poultry and beef production, rivalling the USA in some areas. China's Government heavily subsidises its producers. It is not a signatory to the World Trade Organisation and can dump its produce on any market it so chooses. Dutch and Danish farmers rely heavily on Government subsidies, and they do not see this receiving of assistance as a weakness or failure.

Why can't Australian and State and Federal Governments realise that agriculture is an essential service, just like health care and welfare? The cost of the implementation of this Bill should be picked up by the Government, and food standards should be uniform throughout Australia. I think someone did mention that there may be national legislation in the pipeline.

Like the member for Warrego, I have to question whether we are going overboard with all of these regulations. Although there is a need to protect the general public from negligence—no-one would dispute that there must be basic hygiene procedures—Governments seem intent on protecting everyone from everything and removing the responsibility for self.

I can see this legislation casting a shadow over fundraising by the many charitable organisations and small community groups that raise funds to purchase equipment for their members or simply to assist the unfortunate in their communities. I ask the Minister to clarify whether these groups will be penalised by this legislation. These organisations and minor players in the scheme of things must be taken into consideration. If members walk down the main street of any small town or attend local markets, church fetes and so on, they will see that in many instances the main items are the donated contributions of members—cakes, biscuits, jams and so on. Will this legislation ensure that none of these homemade items can legally be put up for sale without individuals undergoing accreditation? I have not heard of poisoning from these stalls, although it may have occurred, but the bulk manufacturing outlets often find their names in the media for all the wrong reasons.

Everyone shudders when they hear the cases of poisoning that do occur. Having been involved in food preparation myself, I know just how careful one has to be. I know I have watched those secret cameras revealing unhygienic practices that take place and have vowed never to eat outside my home again. Luckily, in my electorate we have the benefit of great cooks, and I have not heard of one instance of a person suffering through buying produce from a street stall.

The Barambah electorate is primarily reliant on food production, with the production of beef, pork, navy beans, peanuts, stone fruits, wines and various other lines. What is particularly galling for most farmers, though, is that the regulations they are subject to are not applied to imported products, which are more often than not of lesser quality and whose production methods may be far below those enforced here. And therein lies the rub. We enforce on our producers control measures so stringent that they often cripple those in the industry and make them unviable but then openly invite lesser quality goods into the country to compete against our own products.

Nobody minds compliance, but I ask that the Government, when imposing these measures on our producers, support our producers against the cheaper, lesser quality controlled imports. It is important to remember that we are talking about food production from the paddock to the plate. This includes every food group—meat, fruit, vegetables, grains and milk products. The butcheries have undergone major changes, as has the dairy industry, and no-one can deny that they supply quality product.

We produce the highest quality products in the South Burnett. If we had the necessary water infrastructure we could be the salad bowl of the future, not only to rival but also to outdo the Lockyer. The possibilities are enormous, but when Governments ask so much of their producers it is essential that those same Governments support them against unfair market forces. It is time this Government started to recognise what most Governments of the world have recognised over many years—that is, the health of the agricultural sector reflects the health of the country. Pliny the Elder, a Roman who lived from 23AD to 79AD, wrote—

"We must, whatever happens, safeguard the family farm."

These words reflect the attitude of Europe and the USA. Australia's Government philosophy is reflected in the words of Donald Horne, who in 1960 wrote—

"Australians will congregate around the seaboard. Inland there will be some corporate farms, some disadvantaged peasant types and some mining towns. The obvious outcome is—oblivion."

Without a major change of Government philosophy, these words may very well be Australia's agricultural epitaph.
