



Speech by

Mr M. ROWELL

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

Hansard 7 September 2000

MACKAY; SUGAR INDUSTRY

Mr ROWELL (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (6.07 p.m.): It is good to see them here. I rise to second the motion moved by the member for Mirani. I wish to place on record the tremendous support provided by the National/Liberal coalition to help the sugar industry recover from one of its worst ever downturns via the Commonwealth's sugar assistance package. The package delivered \$83m of direct assistance through hardship relief and interest subsidies to access up to \$400m in finance for crop replanting. The totality of the Commonwealth's package showed how seriously the coalition regards the situation and the level of commitment to assisting the industry to recover.

The Queensland coalition, at both a State and Federal level, has had to deliver this package. We understand how difficult things are in regions such as Mackay, and it was quite important that we delivered that package. The industry has criticised the Beattie Government's claimed \$10m loan scheme as inadequate—and rightly so. Minister Palaszczuk has already been forced to amend it because no-one could access it.

There is little substance behind the froth and bubble of the Beattie scheme. The 6% interest payments were waived in the first year. Supposing the full \$10m was borrowed in the first year, that was worth \$600,000. For the next two years interest is payable, and the Government's contribution is the difference between the 6% interest rate and the going commercial rate of about 8%—\$200,000 for each of those two years at a full uptake. On a best-case scenario, the Beattie Government is contributing \$800,000 in assisting the industry recover from one of its worst downturns—a lousy \$133 for each of Queensland's 6,000 canegrowers, which is less than 1% of the Federal coalition Government's package.

The Beattie Government is doing nothing about assisting the sugar industry in this State. The paltry package presented by this Government shows what little regard it has for primary industries in this State when major problems occur. However, the Mackay area was very badly affected and the Mackay cooperative decided to do something about assisting farmers. There was a major problem in Mackay with regard to orange rust, which was proving disastrous for the industry in that area. Some crops consisted of 100% of the Q124 variety. This variety is very susceptible to orange rust. Of course, many farms had over 50% of that variety as its crop. Levels of that variety throughout other regions of north Queensland are as high as that, if not higher. The State scheme was absolutely ridiculous. The Mackay cooperative did something about it. It had no option but to put together a package which would assist farmers in replanting their crops.

However, that is not the only problem throughout the north and in Mackay, because rats are also a major issue. In order to solve this problem we traditionally use baits, and thallium baits have been used in the past. Over the past few years, natural predators have also been considered, such as owls. It is interesting to note that the owl is the predator of the mahogany glider, an animal held in high regard and one reason why a lot of properties have not been cleared in north Queensland. Farmers then began to use the chemical Klerate. However, that proved to be detrimental to the health of the owls and its use has subsequently ceased. They then used a product called Racumen, but there have been problems with that chemical in complying with requirements. This situation has been extremely difficult, because at the moment the industry is in the process of obtaining approvals to ensure that that chemical can be used in the future.

Greyback cane grubs are another problem which is devastating the industry from Innisfail in the north to the Mackay region. I have written to the Minister for Primary Industries in relation to this problem. Additional funding is needed for both the rat problem and the greyback cane grub problem. Yes, the State does give some money to the BSES, but that money is inadequate when there are major outbreaks of pests and diseases.

Time expired.
