



Speech by

**Mr M. ROWELL**

**MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK**

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Hansard 5 October 2000

#### **DROUGHT DECLARATIONS**

**Mr ROWELL** (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (6 p.m.): I move—

"That in view of the difficulty drought-stricken primary producers are having in securing individual droughted property declarations because of the narrow interpretation of the eligibility criteria by the Department of Primary Industries, this Parliament calls on the Minister for Primary Industries to direct that all factors are taken into account, including the effectiveness and distribution of any past rainfall and rainfall totals alone are not relied on.

Further, this Parliament calls on the Beattie Government to overturn its decision to abandon State-based drought relief schemes by 2002."

Drought is one of the most insidious and pervasive of all climatic events that Queensland experiences. Drought not only affects our primary producers and our primary industries but also has severe flow-on effects for businesses which depend on those industries, the communities which have been built around those industries and in fact the entire State economy. Drought is not just a problem for individual primary producers; it is a community problem. Drought is unfortunately a fact of life in Queensland, a fact of life which primary producers must plan for in the ongoing management of their businesses. By and large, most producers do it well most of the time. Because drought can have such a pervasive and costly effect on everyone in the community in one way or another, it has long been acknowledged that the Government also has an important role to play in combating its effects.

The success of the community's ability to respond to drought in no small part hinges on the policies employed by the Government of the day. The coalition believes that that response is best achieved through a two-pronged strategy. In our view and in the view of most Queenslanders, an effective drought policy is one which provides every opportunity to anticipate a drought and every opportunity to recover from that drought when the rains eventually arrive. That was the implemented policy of the former coalition Government, and it is a policy we remain committed to.

During most of the time we held Government between early 1996 and June 1998, large areas of Queensland were experiencing one of the worst droughts in memory. We introduced a whole range of measures to help primary producers and the wider community better anticipate drought and better plan their management activities accordingly. Undoubtedly, the most significant of those was the establishment of the Queensland Centre for Climate Applications in Toowoomba, a joint initiative between the Department of Primary Industries and the Department of Natural Resources. This centre is a national nucleus for climate research, applications and extension and is continuing to gain world recognition for the work it is doing to further our knowledge of climate and our ability to respond to climatic change.

On top of that, we set about restoring the services that had been gutted under the Goss Labor Government campaign of rape and pillage against the DPI and its staff—services such as the research and development of new drought tolerant crops and pasture varieties, drought feeding techniques, drought management and services such as the Farm Financial Counselling Service. All of those initiatives were about helping to anticipate drought, helping to plan for it and helping to manage it. In short, they were about helping to improve our primary producers' ability to remain self-reliant during times of drought.

However, at the same time we also acknowledged that there was a need to retain a safety net to help primary producers and their communities ride out those severe droughts. That safety net was

and still is based on the so-called transaction subsidies that operate under the Drought Relief Assistance Scheme. Those subsidies are principally freight rebates on fodder, water carted in to feed and water drought-stricken stock and freight rebates on stock sent away on agistment. These were based on the principle of self-reliance, with the broad objective of preserving the breeding herd and preserving the environmental condition of a property so it is in the best possible condition to recover when the drought eventually breaks.

In recent debate regarding the Drought Relief Assistance Scheme, we heard a lot of rot from the Minister for Primary Industries, and a lot of that worthless rot was the Minister's accusation that the Borbidge Government had somehow committed to wind back the Drought Relief Assistance Scheme.

**Mr Palaszczuk:** Do you want the document tabled?

**Mr ROWELL:** Yes, I would like to look at it. The Minister can do that. The Borbidge Government supported the decision of the Goss Government to phase out drought relief by 2002. However, there was never any decision to revive that failed Goss policy. There was never any decision to scrap the State's drought relief schemes. In fact, I remind this Parliament that it was the former Borbidge Government which did more to assist primary producers battle through the drought at the time than the Goss or Beattie Governments will ever do. It was a Borbidge Government that in fact increased the subsidies on stock returning from agistment from 50% to 75% to 100% for core breeders.

As the situation worsened in 1996, we reintroduced the forward freight subsidy scheme for livestock for six months. I was Minister when we increased the freight subsidy for carting water from a lousy 25% to a meaningful 75%. In fact, in the six months to April 1998, the coalition Government had provided \$2.8m to drought-stricken areas under the Drought Relief Assistance Scheme. Those are not the actions of a Government which does not support drought-relief schemes. Therefore, the Minister should not attempt to come into this Chamber tonight and perpetuate his misinformation about the former coalition Government.

Despite the value of those schemes for those drought-stricken producers, they are not perfect and there have always been a number of reviews aimed at improving them. Many producers currently suffering drought conditions will vouch for the need for change, and even more so now that there are some who, despite the Minister's repeated claims to the contrary, cannot meet the eligibility criteria for individual droughted property declarations, or IDPs, as they are commonly known. My colleagues will mention this in more detail later in the debate.

One of the reviews I refer to was initiated by the DPI under the former Government. I have noticed that the Minister has selectively quoted from that in another grubby and deceitful attempt to misrepresent the coalition's position. What did the Minister do with that review, which had been aimed at improving the scheme? What did the Minister and his Labor Cabinet colleagues decide to do with the State's Drought Relief Assistance Scheme when they took office? They decided to revive the failed Goss Government's decision to scrap drought relief. What was the Beattie Government's drought policy? It did not have one.

Despite the worsening drought situation in southern Queensland and right up into the Burnett and the reminder once again that a safety net is needed, Mr Palaszczuk and his Beattie Government decided to abandon the Drought Relief Assistance Scheme against the very strong advice of groups such as Agforce. Why was this contemptible decision made? There can be no other reason than the Beattie Government's desperate grab for any dollar it can possibly extract out of rural Queensland. This morning we were given more insight by the Minister's inability to explain how the \$10m East Coast Trawl Fishery plan will be funded when he was not given any budget allocation.

**Mr Palaszczuk:** Come back to drought.

**Mr ROWELL:** I am sure the Minister wants me to come back to the issue of drought because I am sure he cannot explain it.

Time expired.

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