



Speech by

**Mr M. HORAN**

**MEMBER FOR TOOWOOMBA SOUTH**

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Hansard 21 June 2000

### **RACING AND BETTING AMENDMENT BILL**

**Mr HORAN** (Toowoomba South—NPA) (3.10 p.m.): I rise to speak in this debate on the Racing and Betting Amendment Bill. It brings back a few memories. In the past I have had the pleasure of establishing and running a greyhound club, the Toowoomba Greyhound Racing Club, as well as assisting the Darling Downs Harness Racing Club to establish racing at Clifford Park when it moved from the Toowoomba showgrounds. I have also had the pleasure of running the Gympie Turf Club for a couple of years. So I have had a bit of a smorgasbord of experience. The point I want to make is that the thing that adds a special dimension to racing is the character that the bookmakers certainly bring to a racetrack.

Of course, we have seen some great changes. When I ran the Gympie Turf Club, which I think was from about 1975 to 1977, we used to average between 14 and 22 bookmakers every single Saturday and every public holiday—56 times a year—at the Gympie track. We put in this great innovation called teleprinter and we got the fluctuations from the AJC in Sydney. I was playing for Suburbs Rugby League Club at the time and I employed a bloke from Wanderers Rugby League Club. I had to watch that he put the fluctuations over the PA before he slipped outside. That was in the seventies. Of course that would not happen today. Things have changed dramatically.

I remember that when we established the Toowoomba Greyhound Racing Club it was an integral part of the development of the new Toowoomba showgrounds. We received funding from the Government of the day in the order of \$1.35m for the establishment of the greyhound racing facilities. Those facilities were part of an overall complex that cost about \$8.5m and that was established there to be shared with the show society. When that club started it was very successful. We used to worry when we got only 800 patrons to a meeting. As time went by we would worry when we got only 400 to a meeting. With the nineties, the race meeting dates changed and so forth. The changing of dates had a dramatic effect upon that club. Of course, the takeover of the club by the Greyhound Racing Authority took away local involvement and local content. It took away the opportunity for people to raise sponsorships and do things on a voluntary or honorary basis and it took away the local character and flavour of the club.

The point I was going to make was that from the time when we started in 1985 we saw the need for change. It was the TAB coverage in particular that made the club successful. I think it took us about two years before we got TAB coverage, but once we got it and were part of the pool on a Saturday night, the returns that were coming back to the club increased and that made the club moderately successful.

I wanted to speak today particularly about racing in Toowoomba. I am pleased to hear my colleague the member for Toowoomba North say that the Supreme Court decision has been in favour of the Darling Downs Harness Racing Club. For many, many years, that club has relied heavily upon some very loyal and staunch harness racing supporters and a lot of volunteer effort. That club was actually established at Clifford Park. It moved from the old Toowoomba showgrounds where it used to run on a quarter mile track on the odd Saturday. It moved to midweek racing at Clifford Park on a big, fast track—a beautiful track—in the centre of the racetrack itself. The driving force then was Mr Charlie Boyd, who had a great horse called Stormy Waters. Some members may remember Stormy Waters, one of the great Queensland champion harness racing horses. It was Charlie's dream to see harness

racing prosper. It has continued for quite some time. As I understand it, the club was financially sound when it was stopped from racing.

Honourable members should consider the combined effects of the cessation of greyhound racing and harness racing in Toowoomba—the biggest inland city in Australia other than Canberra. It is one of the most important regional cities that serves not only the south-west of Queensland—the Darling Downs, the South Burnett and the Stanthorpe and Tenterfield areas—but also the Lockyer Valley. Honourable members should consider the number of people in those areas who are actually involved in the sports of greyhound racing or harness racing who are forced more and more to travel down to Brisbane or somewhere else so that they can partake in the sport or attend a race meeting.

Last weekend I drove down from the other side of Toowoomba stuck behind a horse float with a couple of gigs on the back of it. They came from midway across the Darling Downs. I was thinking to myself, "What a long drive from somewhere out near Oakey, all the way down the range, right through into Brisbane and over to Albion Park. Then they have to saddle up four or so pacers throughout the night and then at the end of the night, at around 11 o'clock, they have to load them all back on the truck and head back." I suppose they would get home on the other side of Oakey—I think the truck came from Egmont Park—at 1 o'clock or 2 o'clock in the morning. How convenient it would have been for those people to have some degree of racing in Toowoomba. If we compare Toowoomba to Townsville—cities of comparable size—it is only right that Toowoomba has the three codes of racing to enable the people of the city and the surrounding area to be able to enjoy the sport.

I will look at the economic benefits. The prize money for the dogs and pacers is no longer there. Some of that money would have been spent in our area or the nearby Lockyer area. But we should look at all the different jobs that have gone: the gatekeepers, the guy who looks after the truck, the people who work on a casual basis looking after the kennels and the starting boxes, the caterers, the bar staff, the bookie, the bookie's clerk, the ladies who work on the tote. All those sorts of jobs associated with harness racing and the dogs have all gone. That cash flow has gone from our town.

We are looking at dairy deregulation in our area, affecting 453 dairy farms. Most of those farms are probably going to lose on average something like \$60,000, \$70,000, \$80,000 a year or more. \$30m is probably going to be lost from the downs purely because of that deregulation. That is not dissimilar to the income that has been lost from a major regional city by the reduction in the number of greyhound racing and trotting meetings. More important is the fact that those particular codes of racing are no longer available in one of the biggest and most important regional cities in Australia.

I well remember that, when we formed the greyhound racing club in the early eighties and we had our first race meeting I think in October 1985, it attracted people into the district. People bought 5 and 10 acre blocks to breed their dogs; it was their hobby. It was a great place to breed dogs because of fewer mosquitoes, less trouble with heartworm and so forth. Over different periods of time, Toowoomba has been a very strong greyhound racing area.

I certainly hope that some commonsense can prevail and we move away from this economic rationalism of closing down these establishments that have served the community and the industry well. If we end up with a dog racing industry based only in Brisbane and the south-east corner, we may as well forget about the rest of Queensland. If we do not make some effort to extend it and spread it out, then we will never, ever build up its strength. That clearly applies to the gallops, the breeding industry and the way in which people involved in country racing graduate from that into provincial racing and on into capital city racing. The backbone of those industries is those people who start off and find that they like it and that they have an ability to have some success with it. That is how it develops.

It is like Rugby League at the moment. All people can think about now is the Broncos. There were some four Rugby League clubs in Gympie, including A grade, reserve grade and under 18s. There is only one club left now. Rugby League is losing its support base. It has lost the people who used to follow that code. It has lost the depth and the interest. It is filtering out all the way down through the schools. It is the same with racing. I know that thought has to be given to the money side of things, but a club ultimately needs to be given the chance to stand on its feet and have its own committee for its own inner strength. If that occurs, that club will go from strength to strength because it is not being run by an administrator from Brisbane who does not understand Toowoomba, does not know where sponsorships are and does not know how to get the local people to come to events on Friday night, Wednesday night or whenever races are held.

One of the killers for the Toowoomba dogs was when the previous racing Minister, Mr Gibbs, changed the race dates. Toowoomba is not a city in which people work shiftwork. It is not the kind of place where things go well on a Wednesday night. Toowoomba is a place where things go well on the weekend. The change of race dates was an absolute killer for that club.

I turn to a matter about which I have written to the Minister, namely, the Toowoomba Turf Club and the setback that club experienced when the decision makers in Brisbane decided that night racing at Clifford Park should be cancelled. That decision was made by the Queensland Principal Club

Committee on the recommendation of the racing manager. It was a trial on the basis of six meetings per year. The club accepted that night racing was on a trial basis. However, the meetings scheduled for the forthcoming season were cancelled without any semblance of consultation. That is one aspect that has upset the club. There have been no moves to work out how this can be compensated and how the money that has been taken from the Toowoomba system can be put back into that system.

**Mr Healy** interjected.

**Mr HORAN:** It was almost half a million dollars. It was \$450,000. Adding the QRIS bonuses, it brings it to over half a million dollars. Over the years the Toowoomba Turf Club has been a pioneer in the development of twilight race meetings and night race meetings. Just after I had been elected to Parliament in 1991, I went to the TAB to speak about how Toowoomba could get into the market of TAB coverage. At the time, the airwaves were so tight on a Saturday afternoon with Brisbane racing, interstate racing, Gold Coast races and a couple of races from the Sunshine Coast.

In the course of that discussion, we looked at if there was a niche late in the afternoon which would allow TAB coverage of Toowoomba races with the result and financial returns. It seemed as though it would fit in with racing in Perth and so forth from about half past three until quarter past seven. Twilight racing has been a success. At the time it meant enormous expense for the club. It was a move that took a fair bit of courage. For a club to put lights in at that time was quite pioneering. In a place like Toowoomba, which is some 2,000 feet above sea level, with its winter climate, it was risky to try it. Certainly, it has worked and it has been a success.

The club is now saying that, because they have lost these six night race meetings, it is important that the club be compensated. It is important that some other alternative be put in place. The club has suggested that perhaps two of those night meetings could be kept. Two night race meets were quite successful—the New Year's Eve night meeting and the Australia Day night meeting. Like other major provincial clubs, the club wants eight races at each of the twilight or afternoon race meetings. Currently, Toowoomba only has seven races. That certainly would be some recompense to Toowoomba. It would also be a recognition that Toowoomba is one of the major racing centres of the State. I have spoken at some length about the need for infrastructure which keeps pushing the industry forward. Well over 600 horses have been worked at Toowoomba over the years. It is a major centre for breeding. With the advent of QRIS, there has been a massive improvement in the breeding and the sorts of mares and stallions being used.

There is also the development of trainers. Whilst some champion trainers have stayed in Toowoomba, some have moved on to Brisbane. There are also the opportunities for jockeys and strappers. Toowoomba is an absolute key to the racing industry in Queensland. Toowoomba deserves to have eight races at meetings. If other major provincial centres have it, Toowoomba certainly deserves it. Historically, economically, in terms of breeding of horses and the standard of racing, Toowoomba has it all. It is one of the best thoroughbred centres in Queensland. It is very important for the Minister to give serious consideration to providing the Toowoomba club with that alternative arrangement rather than just simply scrapping those six night race meetings. Whilst one would not describe the turnover on night racing at Clifford Park as overwhelming, it was tracking up nonetheless. Even the TAB itself was surprised by QPC's decision.

All things considered, it is important that this matter be addressed. The Toowoomba Turf Club should be consulted seriously about whether it is sensible, practicable and feasible to have two night race meetings that would be a guaranteed success and also to provide them with the eight race program that other major provincial tracks have. If that can be done, the Toowoomba Turf Club has a long track record of demonstrating not only to the Government but also to the industry what it can contribute to racing in Queensland. It provides a great option for many trainers in south-east Queensland and the Wide Bay area. One only has to flick through the race guide to see how many horses come from Toowoomba. One only has to go through the Brisbane program to see the contribution Toowoomba horses make to the Brisbane racing program each and every Saturday. Certainly, the quality of Brisbane, Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast racing is enhanced by horses trained in Toowoomba. I would ask the Minister to give that very serious consideration. It is practical, sensible and it recognises one of Australia's great turf clubs.

In conclusion, I hope the Minister can look very carefully at the situation of the greyhound club and the Darling Downs Harness Racing Club. I can say from experience that the greyhound club has operated in the past very successfully. It was only in the 1990s that it did not operate as well as it could have. I lost touch with it after moving into another electorate and coming to Parliament. In that period in the 1990s when it was taken over by the Greyhound Racing Authority, it lost its input. If people in the region were elected to that committee, they would work heart and soul to make that club work. I am sure it could be very successful. It is sad that those people who like the sport of greyhound racing have not been able to continue with that sport. It is often said that it is a working man and working woman's sport. A lot of families are involved in greyhound racing. They get a great deal of enjoyment out of it. It contributed greatly to the racing character of Toowoomba.

It seems strange for a big regional city such as Toowoomba—with a population of 96,000 people and another 30,000 or 40,000 people living in the immediate vicinity—to have one code of racing in particular weeks of the year and nothing in other weeks of the year, not even dogs or trots. I hope that the Minister takes notice of the comments I have made about the three codes. I speak very strongly about the need for the Toowoomba Turf Club to receive recompense for the decision made regarding the sudden cancellation of night racing. I know it was a trial, but it was something that could have worked well for the club.

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