



Speech by

Hon. RUSSELL COOPER

MEMBER FOR CROWS NEST

Hansard 17 May 2000

COMPETITION POLICY REFORM [QUEENSLAND] BILL

Hon. T. R. COOPER (Crows Nest—NPA) (10.53 p.m.): I, too, am glad to take part in the debate on the Competition Policy Reform (Queensland) Repeal Bill; a lot of us want to get a lot of dirty water off our chest in relation to the National Competition Policy. We have heard from speakers on both sides of the House. I commend a number of speakers tonight and those who have spoken previously in this debate in respect of the National Competition Policy. This policy was adopted in about 1994. Tonight and at other times we have heard a fair bit of criticism of Professor Fred Hilmer. This was not necessarily his fault. He was asked to produce a report on national competition and he did so. It was the politicians who took on board that report and asked that it be implemented. The politicians—the people's representatives—are the ones who are at fault. All political parties are to blame for going along with that policy blindly like lemmings, knowing full well that it was causing so much damage and destruction to our economy.

Others would say that in many respects it has done a lot of good. Sure, the big end of town may have benefited. I say good luck to it. But I am thinking of rural and regional Australia, which has been devastated by this dry economic rationalism that has been around for quite some time. At long last, I believe we are witnessing its death knell. People from all sides of the political spectrum are realising the damage it has done to people. We will either support people and humanity or have a sterile economy and a sterile rural and regional Australia. That will drive everyone into the cities and the hinterlands of the Gold and Sunshine Coasts, leaving the rest of Australia bereft. That is the last thing we want. We want to see a vibrant and virile Australia with people in jobs and industry. We have taken away that opportunity. It has taken us a long time to wake up to this. We simply did not know how it was going to affect us and how bad it was going to be.

We cannot blame Professor Fred Hilmer. As I said, he was given the job of coming up with a theory. If we look at the record of the Federal Parliament's debate on the National Competition Policy, we find that very few members spoke to it, because very few people knew what it was about. They obviously did not know much about it at the time they signed off on it, because they said, "This will be good for the country. This is the way we must go." Five years later we were still wondering about it, knowing full well that people were being hurt, that industries were suffering, that people were being put out of work and that families were collapsing, especially in the rural sector. We realise now what a dreadful mistake it has been and people are speaking out against it. I am glad that they are. However, the people who have been hurt in the meantime will never recover, because they are now out of business. Generations of people are out of business because of a theory that people thought was a good idea at the time. That is what is so tragic about this.

The lesson we have learnt now, having gone through this experiment—and I hope this is the last we see of experiments that involve people suffering—is that we should question such theories the next time they surface, when someone is asked to put forward a theory which politicians seek to put into practice. That is not what we are here for. We are here to represent our people and to make sure that they are looked after and are not put through this type of suffering. Many people have been burnt by this dry economic rationalist policy. So many people have been hurt. I hope that we will not see this happening again; that we will not see politicians—people from all walks of life who are supposed to represent people—allowing people to suffer through this sort of thing.

I sincerely hope that this does not happen again. That message was telegraphed very clearly tonight. The honourable member for Southport threw away his prepared speech and spoke from the head and the heart. He laid out very clearly the situation in respect of the dairy industry. This issue is a lot wider than the dairy industry; it crosses the entire spectrum of business and industry. I commend him for his speech and I commend also the honourable members for Cunningham, Keppel and Bulimba, who also spoke extremely well, as did speakers in this debate on previous occasions. We are all singing the same song, but it is all a bit late. It is a case of saying, "Let's not allow this to happen again."

I will not berate Fred Hilmer. This is just something that got out of control. The legislation was groundbreaking in respect of economic and other policies. However, the first thing we should do is put in place some checks and balances to ensure that, if something is getting out of control, it is stopped, reviewed and changed. Many people have gone out of business and many families have been hurt. All of the jobs and other things we have known and lived with for so long have gone, and for what? I do not believe there has been any benefit. How do we return to the past? Some people will say that we need to go back to where we were and some people will say that we cannot turn back the clock. I say that we can turn back the clock if it is in the best interests of the people.
