



Speech by

**Hon. RUSSELL COOPER**

**MEMBER FOR CROWS NEST**

---

Hansard 17 & 31 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.

**Hon. T. R. COOPER** (Crows Nest—NPA) (8.30 p.m.), continuing: As members realise, a couple of weeks ago I moved the adjournment of the debate on this Bill. I am not going to reiterate the things that I said then but, of course, I stand by them. I agree with what most members have said about the National Competition Policy and its repeal. Most people are responsible and realise the need for reform—be it economic reform, social reform, or whatever. Over quite a period in this State I have been involved in a lot of reform. However, I believe that if the reform process has moved too far away from the people there is a need to stop and take stock to see whether that reform is actually assisting the people or hurting them.

As we can see, in many respects people in rural and regional Queensland and other rural and regional areas of Australia are being hurt by National Competition Policy. As such, we should not proceed blindly with that reform. I am saying that the time for experiments should be finished. The National Competition Policy was an experiment that was started by Professor Fred Hilmer. As I said before, I do not blame him one bit for it. He was given the task to look into National Competition Policy, and he did. It is the respective Governments that ticked off on National Competition Policy that are to blame—and Governments from all sides ticked off on it. However, as we now know after five or six years of National Competition Policy, a lot of people have been hurt. A classic example is the dairy industry. I am aware that there is legislation before the House in relation to the dairy industry, so I am not going to dwell on that. However, that is one of the industries—and there are many other industries—that has been hurt by the imposition of National Competition Policy upon us.

Even the people who initiated the National Competition Policy are amazed at the way it took off. It took off because, firstly, there was very little understanding of it but, secondly, when things started to go wrong, very few or no people moved in to say, "Whoops, we had better stop and have a look at this to see whom it is hurting and who is benefiting." If there are benefits to National Competition Policy, that is fine. I do not argue with that. However, if it is hurting people, then it is time to pull it up or make sure that we can put in place safety nets so that people cannot be hurt. Lately, National Competition Policy has gone out of control and too many people have been hurt.

The benefit that Queensland was supposed to receive from National Competition Policy over 10 years from the time of its implementation was about \$2.3 billion. However, \$2.3 billion over 10 years is \$233m a year. That may sound like a lot of money, but it should be viewed in the context of the Queensland Budget of \$17 billion or \$18 billion. Those benefits probably would have been forthcoming to the State, anyway. However, I also know that Federal Governments can intervene to the extent that they will give with one hand and take with the other. I have seen that happen before so many times. Therefore, if our people are being hurt, I believe it is our responsibility to represent them and see that safety nets are put in place.

Over the past 10 years or more, we have seen many so-called reforms that we have been told will be good for us—National Competition Policy, economic rationalism, globalisation, trade reform, level playing field and political correctness. We have had the lot and we have had a gutful, because we have not been in control of our own destiny. That has worried our people. It is one thing for us in this place to be worried, but it is worse for our people to be worried—our people who are going broke because of the so-called reforms that were put in place. I cannot be heard because of old Pat up the back.

**Mr Purcell:** I will entertain your guests while you are away.

**Mr COOPER:** I know very well that he agrees with everything that I have said. I know that he has listened to every word I have said.

**Mr Kaiser:** I always have.

**Mr COOPER:** I am not talking about that member; I am talking about the member sitting behind him. I know that the member for Bulimba agrees with every word that I say. During this debate, a lot of members have said some words of sense, particularly the member for Southport, who spoke extremely well about this issue. As I said, our job is to represent other people. If we see our people being hurt, be it our dairy farmers, our sugar producers or our wool producers—it does not matter who it is—it is up to us to stand up for them and defend them.

I welcome the review of National Competition Policy that was brought on by the Federal Government because it realised finally that there was a need to see whether or not this policy was actually working. On umpteen dozen occasions we told the Federal Government that it was not working and that we had created two Australias—one Australia that was not benefiting, which is rural and regional Australia, and the big end of town, which was benefiting. As I have said before, the big end of town is doing well. We all know that. That is fine, but people in rural and regional areas are not doing well.

I went to that review process that was held in Toowoomba. Such meetings were held throughout the nation, but I went to the one that was held in Toowoomba and put forward a case, especially in relation to the dairy industry. One or two people on that review panel knew what they were talking about. However, the one from South Australia did not have the faintest idea.

**Dr Clark:** You will be rewriting the National Party web site, will you?

**Mr COOPER:** She was a professor. What has the member been doing tonight? She should just relax. It is all right. I regard the National Competition Policy review that was held in Toowoomba as far more important. I think that the member should sit up and take notice of this. Such a review might have been held in Cairns, and maybe the member put forward a submission herself. Did she? No, she did not. She was out of town at the time.

However, I was at the review that was held in Toowoomba, and I made sure that I represented my people, including dairy farmers. An enormous number of dairy farmers in my electorate are suffering deeply through deregulation and National Competition Policy. That is why I went to that review in Toowoomba and put my case. Most of the people on the panel understood what I had to say, but a professor from South Australia did not have the faintest idea of the damage this policy was causing. She said, "Competition is good for everyone." I thought, "You are okay. You are fine because you are in a job. But you are not in that industry that is being hurt." So that person had to be put in her place. I can assure members that she was because, as I said, my job is to represent my people.

The important thing to note is that most other countries look after their people. Recently in the US, President Clinton gave \$17 billion or \$18 billion to the farm lobby of that country. We do not expect to receive that sort of money. Nevertheless, America will look after its farmers first. Japan will always look after its farmers first.

**Mr Purcell:** Look at France.

**Mr COOPER:** France is a classic example, as is the European Community. They are all in together.

**Mr Feldman:** The subsidy is \$20 billion in the US.

**Mr COOPER:** It is a massive amount of money. We can say good luck to them, because it is not for us to interfere in what they are doing. However, it is our job to make sure that we look after ourselves first. Most countries do. Nearly every country in the world looks after itself first, except this country. We are sick and tired of that. That is what I am saying: it is about time that we pulled up this National Competition Policy, because if it is going too far then it is our responsibility to make sure that our people are okay. That is the point that I am trying to make.

We know that there will always be reform. We know there is a need to make sure that we are operating efficiently and effectively. But if that means a scorched earth policy that leaves the rural areas of Australia decimated, we are making a mistake. It is one thing to have people living and earning a useful and productive living in the bush, but it is another thing to have them wiped out and relocated to the hinterlands behind Brisbane, the Gold Coast and the Sunshine Coast. That will not do any of us any good. It is far better to have them out there being productive. We are not saying that they need a handout. They do not want a handout. They want to be able to make a living on a fair playing field, not a level playing field.

We were told that reform was going to be good for us, but we have not seen anyone in our constituencies benefiting from it. That is a point that seems difficult for others to comprehend. Our people, having been hurt for five or six years now, are wondering where all of these benefits will fall. They have not fallen to them. That is why they feel frustrated and angry. That is why there is a different political atmosphere out there in the real world. Members opposite know that. They were affected by

the then One Nation vote. That vote built up through frustration and anger over 20 years. It just built up and built up.

As I said, everyone ticked off on economic rationalism, globalisation, political correctness—all those sorts of things. They were alien to us. For a start, they were never explained properly. In addition, the safety nets were not put in place for the people who were going to be hurt. That is where all of us went wrong. That does not mean that we should continue down this path just because someone said at the time that this was a good idea and a great experiment. If it is going wrong, we should stop it. We should pull it up and say, "Okay. We have gone so far. Now where do we go from here?" We should not continue blindly down the path and fall off the cliff like lemmings. Members opposite know where I am coming from. We do not have to continue with this policy. It is eminently sensible to pull it up and have another look at it. We all want to make sure that we are producing efficiently. I do not know how many times rural people have been asked to be more efficient. They are now so efficient that we are starting to denude the country of its people, be it the work force, the landowners or the people in small business. They are all affected. My electorate, being a rural electorate, is heavily affected.

**Mr Kaiser:** Saved by Labor preferences.

**Mr COOPER:** That is hardly the point.

**Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER** (Ms Nelson-Carr): Order! The member will stick to the topic of competition policy reform.

**Mr COOPER:** I am. Madam Deputy Speaker, if you want to refer to the interjection, I do not mind. I am happy to talk on that, because I appreciate the fact that I was able to continue to represent my people. That is our job in here. The moment we forget that, it becomes a different ball game. As the member knows, I will be leaving here soon and I can leave it up to him to make sure that he looks after my people. And he better look after them well, because I will come back to haunt him if he does not.

**Mr Hamill:** That is a dreadful threat.

**Mr COOPER:** I am sure the Treasurer appreciates that. That is another story and that will come in time, whenever the Government is prepared to call the next election. In the meantime, I will continue to represent my people strongly and make sure that their interests are fully and properly—

**Mr Hamill:** You are doing a Banquo's ghost act tonight.

**Mr COOPER:** A what?

**Mr Hamill:** Banquo's ghost.

**Mr COOPER:** What on earth is he talking about?

**Mr Baumann:** Shakespeare.

**Mr COOPER:** Sorry, the Treasurer is way above me.

The issue that we are talking about tonight—and which the Deputy Speaker would love us to get back to—is of vital importance to every member in this place. As far as the city vote is concerned, at the big end of town there are people who are doing well and the economy is not too bad. We are constantly told that the economy is booming; that there is 4% growth and so on. The people in my area are not experiencing that boom. It is tragic to see the effect on small businesses out there. It is one thing to ignore that and walk away from it and say, "In five years' time it will be okay. This is good for you", but it is another thing in the meantime to recognise that we are dealing with human beings. If those people are going to suffer even more than they are now, it is our responsibility to try to make sure that we make their life a bit easier. That is what this debate is all about. I commend those who brought on this debate.

**Mr Hamill:** Are you supporting the repeal?

**Mr COOPER:** Yes, I am.

**Mr Hamill:** Last week you supported the amendment.

**Mr COOPER:** The honourable member is dead wrong.

Time expired.

---