



Speech by

SHAUN NELSON

MEMBER FOR TABLELANDS

Hansard 1 March 2000

COMPETITION POLICY REFORM [QUEENSLAND] REPEAL BILL

Mr NELSON (Tablelands—IND) (10.07 p.m.): As the Leader of the Opposition said, I remember the last time we debated this issue, and it was a time when everyone in this House was in agreement. I listened to the speech by the Treasurer. With my limited intellect, I managed to cut through some of it. I can understand where he is coming from in terms of the money it would cost this State to completely abolish NCP. I can certainly see where he is coming from in that respect. I agree that to clear-fell the legislation would probably not be the most intelligent and well-thought-out way to go about it. But in saying that, it is my strong and firm belief that we must do anything we can—anything at all—and we must spare no punches in fighting what I and many other people consider to be completely anti-competition policy.

The actions that have been taken in the name of NCP up to date have, as far as I am concerned, been of very little or no gain to any part of Queensland—not just rural Queensland, not just the area that I represent, but to any part of Queensland. Today in the paper I read in particular about how milk is going to go up another 9c a litre.

Mr Feldman: It already went up 6c.

Mr NELSON: Yes, so it is going up and up and up and up and up.

To be able to pay dairy farmers compensation for destroying what was, up until now, a viable industry which provided milk for a State and for a country at a relatively reasonable price we will have to hike another 11c onto the milk price. This will be necessary to accommodate the compensation package that will flow from the Commonwealth.

What we are seeing is the direct opposite of what was meant to be achieved. We had been led to believe that economic rationalism would lead us into world markets. I am not an expert on this subject. As I said, I thought we were in agreement on the last occasion when we debated this subject. I am yet to hear of anything wonderful that has come from the National Competition Policy except for the payment of compensation for taking it up.

No-one wants compensation for their business, whether they are a farmer, a businessman or anyone else. These people simply want to retain their businesses. Dairy farmers are not dairy farmers because it pays well. Usually people are dairy farmers because it is a generational thing. The farm is handed on by grandparents and it is a family business. As honourable members will notice, I am concentrating on one industry at this stage which is affected by the National Competition Policy. People are involved in dairy farming because it is the way of life which they pursue.

I live in a country town because I love living in a country town. I dislike Brisbane intensely. I was born in Brisbane, but I could not live in Brisbane. Many people who had chosen the lifestyle I prefer have been forced out of the country areas because jobs are disappearing. In his speech, the member for Whitsunday articulated some of the reasons why the National Competition Policy is destroying areas where jobs were provided in the community. I do not think the problems related to the National Competition Policy are endemic to rural communities; they affect the whole of Queensland and the whole of Australia. Some of the reasons articulated by the member for Whitsunday are quite true and have horrific consequences for rural communities.

I have said in this Parliament previously that it is unfortunate when young people are forced to leave rural communities to look for work. I have another 22 days of being a youth. It is unfortunate that young people are being driven away from country towns because there are no jobs.

Mr Mickel: What date is that?

Mr NELSON: 22 March.

Mr Mickel: That's your birthday?

Mr NELSON: Yes. I will be 27. It is finally starting to hit me.

Mr Mickel: You are holding out for it?

Mr NELSON: Yes. Most of my friends have moved to the city to pursue incomes and a way of life that they thought would be better. My friends moved to the city because many of them could not find work in rural towns. That is not the fault of the Labor Party or the National Party; it is something that has been going on for many years.

At night-time I often read through Hansard in the library and I have seen where the same debates were occurring in the late 1800s. This problem is occurring in many countries around the world. I might be a dumb hick, or a farmer's boy, and I might not have the intelligence of a Rhodes Scholar, but no-one has articulated the benefits of the National Competition Policy. We have heard about compensation payouts, and that is about all.

My electorate does not have a high proportion of university graduates. We do not have thousands of people in the MDIA who have a doctorate in economics. People continually ask me, "What benefits can we derive from the National Competition Policy? Why is it pursued in Government?" When I returned home on the last occasion when we debated this matter I was able to say that we had consensus in the Queensland Parliament and we were going to stand up and announce, as one, that we do not support the National Competition Policy because it has gone too far and the National Competition Council is out of control and has to be reined in.

I felt that the motion moved by the Leader of the Opposition tonight had merit but for some reason it has been ruled out of order. I believe that is most unfortunate because, as a Queensland, nothing would make me prouder—and I am certain that I speak for a lot of people in my electorate—than the thought that the Parliament of Queensland, all 89 members, stood up to the Federal Parliament. Let us face it, the Federal Parliament is not our boss. The Federal Parliament is equal with us as far as being a Parliament is concerned. The Queensland Parliament is a separate entity.

It would do this State a great deal of good, and it would do the farmers in my electorate a great deal of good, if the members of the Queensland Parliament stood together and said, "We are going to fight the NCP." That would be a huge shot in the arm to rural communities. I would be able to go home and say to the people in my electorate, "Something is being done. It is not being done by the member for Surfers Paradise, it is not being done by the member for Brisbane Central—it is being done by all of us."

As I said, I believed that we had consensus in this Parliament. I have spoken to some members of the ALP and I know that they feel that the NCP—

Mr Davidson interjected.

Mr NELSON: I couldn't name one, but I know that they feel that way. They understand the problems that are being caused by the NCP where farmers have to walk off their properties.

I realise that there may be valid reasons why the motion moved by the Leader of the Opposition was ruled out of order. As the member for Southport said, there may not be valid reasons for that. However, I do not want to weigh into that debate. Any attempt to rein in the NCP and the NCC and give them a bit of a touch-up on behalf of the people of Queensland would be welcomed by my electorate.

I will go into more detail about the way in which the dairy industry is suffering in my electorate. Recently, a decision was made by a tribunal which upheld the right of 22 appellants to a further entitlement of milk. That decision has fragmented the farming community on the Tablelands to the extent that we have 160 dairy farmers against 22 dairy farmers. I will probably be hanged when I return home for saying this, but those 22 dairy farmers were pursuing what they believed to be their fundamental right in trying to get the milk quota back. This has fragmented a community which, up until a few years ago, was completely and utterly cohesive.

The figures fluctuate, but we have some 196 dairy farmers in the Malanda area. If we lose even 10 or 15 of those farmers it will be a major blow to the town in which I live. I do not know how many honourable members have been to Malanda, but it is a pretty little town in a nice part of the world. A lot of very good people live there. There are many towns which are similar to Malanda throughout Australia. It would be a tragedy—

Mr Davidson: Home of Malanda milk.

Mr NELSON: Home of Malanda milk—Dairy Farmers, some of the greatest milk ever made. The point is that it would be a massive tragedy to lose towns like Malanda, and we have been losing towns like Malanda since before I was born.

Mr Mickel: How long is that? 25 years?

Mr NELSON: 26 years. For 26 years, towns like Malanda have been slowly dying. Again, I am not trying to lay the blame at anyone's feet; I am just trying to articulate how I feel about the current policies that are directing this State and this nation. Those policies are not coming from the ALP, those policies are not coming from the National Party, those policies are not coming from the Liberal Party; those policies are coming from a group of people who were not elected by anyone from where I come. I certainly cannot remember putting forward any ballot papers with their names on them. This National Competition Council seems to be directing the downfall of places like the town from where I come, Malanda. The loss of Malanda and the loss of people who come from towns such as Malanda will be a major blow to our society in general. It is people such as the people with whom I live that we refer to when we make our motherhood statements or when we make our aspiration statements about Australia and what it is to be Australian. When we lose that heart and soul from those areas, we are really just giving away a part of ourselves. We are giving away a part of ourselves for no reason—through no direction or policy—but through a tired belief that economic rationalism will keep us in a world market.

Many people believe that isolationism might not work. I do not hold myself out to be an expert on history, but isolationism certainly worked for America in the 1920s. It also certainly worked for other countries. It certainly has given some benefit to many countries in the world up until today, because most countries in the world still maintain tariff protection and have what would not be classed as a National Competition Policy. Recently, I talked to a man from Alabama— what I consider to be one of the most wonderful parts of the world—and I can certainly empathise with a lot of what he said. He said to me that he found it hard to believe that, in Australia, we ate imported beef or imported products that we grow domestically. That man said quite emphatically that he knows no-one in Alabama who would buy imported food products that were grown domestically in Alabama. This issue is not just a problem with Parliament; it is a problem with people in general. At numerous public meetings in my electorate I have said to the people who live in my electorate, "You cry about Woolworths, you deride Coles, yet you still shop there. You still do not buy locally. You still do not shop and get things from your local stores." At the moment, the feeling within the community is that all is lost, that we cannot fight—"Why bother? Why should we even try? Why don't we just roll over and give in. I'm going to be like everyone else."

Mr Davidson: It costs money.

Mr NELSON: The member for Noosa is quite right. It usually costs more, so it is—

Mr Hamill: David Watson doesn't think so.

Mr NELSON: No. As I said, at one stage in my misguided youth I was a member of the Liberal Party, but I am no longer.

Mr Hamill: Did you breathe a sigh of relief?

Mr NELSON: I think they breathed a sigh of relief when I left.

I honestly believe that for so long—for a great many more years than I have been around—this country has suffered from a lack of true leadership. I am not talking about leadership in the form of one great, magnanimous leader whom we would all follow blindly into battle, but true leadership on all levels of Government, and from people in communities who have the ability to speak out and say, "This is the direction we should be taking", or, "This is the path that we should be taking." It is usually the hardest job of a leader to actually lead, instead of standing back, listening to the masses and saying, "I am going to do whatever makes this group happy", or, "I am going to do whatever makes that group happy." As a leader, one of the hardest things to do is to take on board what the people are saying and say, "Right, we can do it this way."

Unfortunately in this country, politicians and politics seem to dictate to the people what they want but they never ever actually take into consideration what the people are saying they want. Perfect examples of that are the NCP, the GST, the sale of Telstra—all of these wonderful things that are happening to us as a nation. Whenever I say, "We didn't want to sell Telstra. Telstra belongs to the people. We didn't want to sell it", I am told, "Yes, but we had a mandate to sell it." Then I ask, "Where did you get that mandate from?" I am told, "Just from being elected."

It is quite unfortunate, because many, many members of this Chamber are moving on in years. Personally, I have nothing against old people, but in 20 years' time when I am looking to settle down and make a life for myself and, as my mother keeps saying, get a real job, I would like to have a country to settle down in, and I would like to have a place that I can call home.

Mr Swarten: Are you still exporting mangoes from your part of the world to Japan?

Mr NELSON: Yes, we are exporting mangoes. If the Minister was listening he would know that, at the very start of my speech, I said that I understood the whole argument about—

Mr Swarten: No, I am just saying: do you think they will still be exporting mangoes to Japan?

Mr NELSON: I hope so—to China and Japan. I truly hope so. I truly hope that there is a place for this country, but right now—

Mr Mickel: You lost us when you were talking to us about age.

Mr NELSON: The member for Logan would not come into that category.

All I ask—and this is a simple request from a simple person from what I am proud to say is a simple part of the world—

Mr Swarten: They are not simple out there at all.

Mr NELSON: They are simple, honest, decent folk. They are not pretentious and most of them do not have anything more than the best interests of their community at heart. There are some bad people, but there are mostly good people.

Mr Swarten: They are not simple there at all.

Mr NELSON: From my point of view, I believe that I am a simple person and proud to be so. I do not hold myself out to be a complicated mess.

Tonight, all I ask from every member of this Parliament, regardless of party politics and regardless of their personal opinion on this matter, is that the 89 of us as individual people—as patriotic Queenslanders and as people who believe, as we did in the last debate, that National Competition Policy has gone awry—look at the motion put forward by the member for Surfers Paradise in a bipartisan manner. Maybe we have to come back and address it properly in the future because certain things are not right. We try to stand up to the Federal Government and we try to stand up to their whole attitude. Like the Government members are asking the Opposition to do with GST, let us do that with the NCP. Let us work together and beat this dog, because it is really ripping out our hearts. It is destroying what I call home. Eventually, it will also destroy what other members call home. That is all I ask. I do not think that it is that much to ask, considering the previous debate that we had in the Chamber.
