



Speech by

SHAUN NELSON

MEMBER FOR TABLELANDS

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FOOD PRODUCTION [SAFETY] BILL

Mr NELSON (Tablelands—IND) (12.03 p.m.): I place on record my support for the amendments foreshadowed by the honourable member for Lockyer and the Opposition. Given appropriate amendment, I think this is a good Bill.

Our primary producers, in Queensland and throughout Australia, are the best in the world—but we can always do better. One of the things that we need to look at in primary production is making sure that the products that we sell from areas such as the tablelands, the Lockyer Valley and all the other great agricultural areas throughout Queensland are the best they can possibly be to guarantee the safety of the public that is consuming them. It is in the best interests of primary producers to make sure of this. They are the people making a livelihood from that product. So I do not think that there would be much opposition from the agricultural sector to a Bill that would solidly guarantees their income.

Without going too much into what a lot of other members have already said today, I would like to take up a few threads. The first one that I would like to talk about is, of course, AQIS, the importation of pestilence into our country and the lack of protection that AQIS provides in defending us from the importation of diseases into our country.

We are very fortunate that we are an island continent and that we can isolate ourselves from foreign countries that have different agricultural practices. We should capitalise on this fortunate circumstance to the best of our ability and make sure that our borders are impenetrable to foreign disease. One situation in which we cannot protect ourselves is when Chinese fishing junks packed full of people and food land on the beaches in and around Cairns.

Cape York is another area of concern. Cape York is a natural highway that leads down into the most fertile and productive agricultural areas in Australia: the Hann and Atherton Tablelands. The simple fact is that this agricultural area, through the MDIA, grows more produce than any other agricultural area in Australia and it is under direct threat at all times from disease and foreign bugs accessing the area along that natural highway. From time to time we do have outbreaks of disease. For example, we recently had the spiralling white fly and the papaya fruit fly attacking this jewel in the crown of agricultural areas which is the tablelands.

Having said that, I must say that the responsibility cannot fall solely at the feet of AQIS. We need also to look to the Department of Defence. We need a much more adequate patrol of the north through our Naval Reserve units and Air Force patrols on Cape York. Although strategic defence concentration has been focused on the Timor Gap for a long time, we need to look at Cape York, because even though there is no direct threat from any country to our north, there is the threat of invasion in the form of pestilence and disease through fishing junks and illegal refugees landing on Cape York.

The current idea being espoused by the Federal Labor Party is to implement a coast guard. I think that that is a particularly good idea—one of the very few we have seen from a Labor Defence spokesman. It is a particularly good idea and it would be very good if it was implemented in a manner in which the patrol boat squadrons were not taken from the Navy and turned into coast guards but operated separately from the Australian Navy. I think that that would combat a lot of the import of

disease through Cape York Peninsula and the Gulf Country at the moment. That is one idea that needs to be looked at in addressing the importation of foreign pests, especially into northern Australia.

I wish to raise an issue that the member for Lockyer touched on at the end of his speech. That is: where does the blame actually lie for a lot of outbreaks of food poisoning? It is a proven fact that a lot of food poisoning cases occur in the family home. It has nothing to do with the food that is actually purchased at the shop; it has to do with the way the food is handled by the people preparing it.

Dr Kingston: It is 90%.

Mr NELSON: Yes, that figure is 90%. I assume that the member for Maryborough will soon speak on this subject as well.

A lot of cases of food poisoning occur because people prepare food incorrectly, they leave food lying on a bench or use other unsafe practices. It has nothing to do with the way the food was prepared at the farm level. I talk to many, many primary producers who say that they work their hardest to put out the best quality produce that they can; it is their life's pride. We must also remember that market forces dictate that they put out the best product they possible can so that they can compete on an open market. Then people leave their shopping bags containing a carton of milk in the car for four hours; they get it home; discover that it has gone off and ring Dairy Farmers or Pauls—the honourable member for Southport will be speaking after me—to complain because the milk has gone off. If a carton of milk is left in a car for four hours in the Queensland climate, of course it will go off. It has nothing to do with the farmer or the factory; it has to do with the consumer's incorrect handling of the product after the point of purchase.

I would like to see the Minister address this in his reply, because I think that this is a very important point. It is a point that I think would explain the statistics and absolve the primary producers from blame. As the member for Maryborough quite rightly said, about 90% of the cases of food poisoning occur in this manner.

I believe supermarkets put a lot of effort into maintaining product cleanliness on their shelves. It is very hard to legislate against people taking products home and having them deteriorate in their own storage facilities. For example, refrigeration levels are marked on a lot of items of store produce, but how many people know at what temperature their personal refrigerator operates? I know I have never put a thermometer inside my refrigerator and checked how cold it is. One might have a very old refrigerator that has a leak. The temperature inside that refrigerator could be above the required refrigeration temperature for milk. I believe milk should be stored at 4 degrees Centigrade. However, a home refrigerator might not be running at that temperature. The refrigerator might feel cold if one puts a hand inside it, but it is probably not cold enough to prevent bacteria growing in milk. I would like to hear the Minister refer to those issues in his reply. A lot of the problems of contamination of food can be put down to bad handling by the consumer.

The matter of the Garibaldi meat scare in South Australia was referred to me. In the Mareeba area of my electorate we have a large migrant population and many of these people make their own sausages and other meat products. They consume these products, even though in some cases they might be prepared incorrectly. It is possible that this could cause poisoning. The media, being the media, can portray a different story of such an incident. The preparation of some foods that are grown in backyards can lead to outbreaks of disease. Such incidents can bring the whole industry into disrepute, and that is unfortunate.

I believe that all primary producers turn out the best product they can from their farms in order to maintain their commercial viability. If a farmer produces a bad product he will find that someone else gains a contract and he will go out of business.

I believe this Bill is a good idea. However, I do not think this legislation will bring about too many changes. Most producers do the right thing. I would like the Minister to address the issue of consumer preparation of food because I believe that it is the biggest issue that we need to look at in relation to this subject.
