



Speech by

VAUGHAN JOHNSON

MEMBER FOR GREGORY

Hansard 18 & 19 October 2000

FOOD PRODUCTION [SAFETY] BILL

Mr JOHNSON (Gregory—NPA) (5.45 p.m.): I rise to speak on the Food Production (Safety) Bill, which is one of the most important pieces of legislation to come before this House. I notice that the Minister is nodding his head.

One thing I want to mention is that I believe this legislation is probably in the Queensland House before its time. We will have national accreditation legislation where we will be looking at the processing of food and the importance of the quality of the food that we produce in this nation. If legislation is going to be introduced in the State Parliament ahead of the Federal legislation, or legislation in the other States, we must have parallels. When we consider these parallels we have to look at a situation in relation to transportation in this nation. I notice that the Minister for Transport is in the House. We have to consider road rules and other rules associated with transportation.

The point I make is that we must have parallels across State jurisdictions. I do not know whether the Minister has had a preview of legislation which could be introduced federally or in the other States, but the real issues here—and the issues I want to talk about this evening—are issues relevant to my own electorate. As the Minister is well aware, I represent an area that covers a huge part of Queensland, and a huge part of the primary production areas of this State.

The member for Warrego touched on the question of quality assurance. I remember that, when quality assurance came to be part of reality in the area of attempting to capture Government contracts, we saw that a lot of the companies that took out quality assurance were never able to gain Government contracts. I hope that with this legislation people who spend thousands of dollars in gaining accreditation will have obstacles put in their way which will either force them out of business or put them in a predicament where they cannot function as a business.

I want to refer to the livestock transport industry. Over the years, transport operators, pastoralists and farmers have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on better yards, better fencing and better crates in an attempt to allow livestock to be better managed on the farm so that the producer can gain maximum dollar for his product. Queensland Rail is a classic example. QR has spent millions of dollars in recent years on its cattle train concept in an attempt to provide a good, safe environment for the passage of livestock, whether they be store stock or whether they be fat stock, from the place of production to the place of marketing, whether it be the saleyards or the abattoir.

It is important to remember that we are speaking of food production from the farm to the marketplace. An important factor to consider is the cost involved. I think many people would not be aware of the costs that are involved. In today's market, the cost of the freight of materials alone to whatever part of Queensland we live is an horrific expense—whether it be to the pastoral industry, the mining industry or to someone else.

One issue that I wish to touch on this evening is that of country butcher shops. I noticed the member for Warrego also touched on that issue. Over recent days, representations have been made to me by concerned businesspeople in my electorate about Department of Primary Industries inspections of butcher shops in the western areas of the State. I understand that the butcher shops in question are at Winton, Blackall and Aramac, in my electorate, and at Julia Creek.

Back in about 1993 the QLMA introduced a Q-Safe program into the meat industry, and butchers, meat processors and slaughterhouse operators have expended considerable time and money upgrading their operations. The industry is arguably now at the forefront of all food industries in

terms of food safety and hygiene. I do not think any honourable member would say there is a butcher shop in this State that does not present good-quality meat. One thing that we as Queenslanders and Australians look for when buying meat processed in rural areas or in the city is a quality product—something we have always had.

Going back in time, I was told by one of my constituents that an inspector once told him, "You're a long way out. But it won't be too bad. If you do this and do that, you'll be all right." Officers in the Minister's department now tell me that all requisitions will be complied with within 28 days. Although I do not have a problem with the period set for compliance, I believe we need to adopt an approach of giving these people the opportunity to comply and remain viable. These businesses employ local people. For example, Kelly Davis, his wife, Lyn, and the boys run a magnificent operation. They are killing meat at Barcoo Meats at Blackall in western Queensland. They are producing a fantastic product. The next time the Minister is in Blackall he should have a look at Kelly's shop and look at the quality of the meat he is producing, which is all locally killed. He is supplying shops in Barcaldine, Longreach, Emerald and as far east as Rockhampton with the product he is killing in the west.

Things would be a lot better if the Government showed some understanding in respect of these operations. If they do not have the \$5,000 or \$6,000 needed to comply with the regulations put in place by the Minister's department, the Government would be better off giving them that money so they can comply. We are not talking about a lot of money. By doing so the Minister would be guaranteeing a service to the people of the region and promoting employment through these shops. When speaking about compliance, we have also to consider the continued viability of these people—and I do not say that lightly.

This morning I had a long talk with one of the officers from the meat and livestock division of the Department of Primary Industries and we canvassed many areas in relation to the meat industry. In South Australia there have been some fatalities as a result of processed or blended meats. But we are talking here about good, wholesome meat produced through country abattoirs. We are not looking to fragment the inspection service such that people in regional Queensland are told, "You can have a less stringent inspection of your business, whereas big companies, such as AMH or CMG, have to have a more stringent inspection." That is not the point at all. I will stand by country butchers all day and night. We do not need legislation that will cripple their operation to the extent that the big fellas take advantage by supplying meat to rural and regional areas at a price that will be profitable to them. In relation to the meat production in those regions, we have to give those rural areas the opportunity to be the benefactors of their own processing operations.

In speaking about the processing of food from the farm to the plate we are talking not only about meat but also all other foodstuffs. We know about the problems that the dairy industry has been confronted with recently. There is probably no industry that has put in place more stringent safety standards than the dairy industry, which has refrigerated vats and containers for transportation. Over a long period it has carried out a very sophisticated operation to produce a quality product for the people who purchase it off the shop shelf. It is no different from any other processed food.

Fruit and vegetables are no exception in that regard. Whenever I go to Emerald I note the potential of that region. Fruit and vegetables are transported daily out of that region by companies such as Harker and Lindsay Brothers. They load out of those places all the time. Every time we travel the road between Barcaldine and Emerald we see a refrigerated container truck transporting fruit from north Queensland to marketplaces in Adelaide, New South Wales, Victoria and so on.

It goes without saying that we have a quality system in place in this State, from the farm operation to the manufacturing industry and the processors. It is important to remember that we are living in times when quality is expected. People expect quality. It is undeniable that we have the best farmers and livestock in the world. We have the best wool and cotton industries. In every horticultural, vegetable or other agricultural industry, including sugar, our farmers are in the highest echelon. We have a top-quality production system in place, and that is providing Queenslanders with the best product available.

As I said earlier, the real problem with this legislation is that it is ahead of its time. I hope we do not see with this legislation a repeat of what happened when Ed Casey was the Minister in this State. I am speaking about some of the compliance measures put in place with respect to bakeries and the egg industry.

We need to have in place a system that conforms with those in other States, but we do not need to be ahead of the other States in putting restrictions on farmers, and the industries and businesses that support them, and impeding the generation of employment through the hard yards put in by our farmers. At the end of the day, the flow-on effects produce benefits for both city and regional areas.

On many occasions I have cited the equation that, for every beast produced in western areas and transported to the coast, three jobs are created every day. Each beast is creating jobs for three

people per day. If we take into account in that analysis the hundreds of thousands of cattle that are slaughtered here, we see that the 3,000 head a day being killed at places such as AMH and the cattle being slaughtered at Dinmore and elsewhere are producing jobs for Queenslanders.

The important issue is the quality of the product. At the end of the day, the real issue is safeguarding the food industry. I am well aware of that. But at the same time, we should not be putting in place impediments that retard an industry that we are trying to make the best in the country. The other day the Minister raised the issue of tick inspection services on the northern line.

Mr JOHNSON (Gregory—NPA) (11.36 a.m.), continuing: Last night in the House I touched on the fact that the Department of Primary Industries may cut back its stock inspection services or tick inspection services on the northern line. This issue is causing a great deal of angst and concern to many pastoralists and cattle producers in north Queensland, especially those involved with the live cattle export at Karumba, Townsville and the port of Darwin. In this regard, it is important to remember the cost of production and transportation. One breakdown in a system such as this can impose great costs on an industry which is trying to protect its image and create a quality product across the top end. If these services are to be wound back, they have to be policed by professional people, whether they be vets who have an affiliation with the Department of Primary Industries or stock inspectors who have an affiliation with the Department of Primary Industries. Any lesser trained personnel would have significant ramifications for the cattle industry of north Queensland.

I know that stock inspection services carried out by the Department of Primary Industries are put under great pressure to ensure that they uphold the traditions we have been accustomed to in this State, and I notice that the Minister has returned to the Chamber. It is absolutely paramount that these services be totally professional, whether they come under the jurisdiction of the Department of Primary Industries or under the jurisdiction of an offshoot of Primary Industries in conjunction with the local government. I want to put that issue on the record today.

Another area I want to mention, and it is fitting to mention it now, is beef produced in the far south-west of this State. The Minister is well aware of the successful initiative by graziers in that area in exporting their product to Japan. These graziers have taken a significant initiative to pursue their own market and have put in place steps to ensure that they get more money for their product. I believe that this initiative is a first for Australia in more ways than one.

As I said in the House last night, farmers, graziers and pastoralists in this country are amongst the best in the world. I congratulate them on this initiative. Initiatives such as this go towards complementing the Food Production (Safety) Bill, because they demonstrate that people want to produce quality products. Those graziers are certainly doing that and are therefore getting a better return on their investment because of their own initiative and vision.

I will touch on the issue of road and other transport infrastructure, which I raised in the House yesterday. One of the most important things is getting produce—whether it be fruit and vegetables or fat cattle, sheep, pigs or whatever—to the marketplace in a virtually unblemished condition. A few years ago I was fortunate to be able to go to Japan on a trade delegation with the Honourable Geoff Smith and other colleagues from the Parliament. We saw first-hand how much emphasis the Japanese put on first-class, quality product. A lot of that product came from Australia. That brings me back to what we are trying to achieve here. As I said, Queensland Rail and transport operators have achieved better configurations and have put better rolling stock on rail and better vehicles on roads over recent years. Those things are certainly complementary. The Government has to continue to foster that development.

This morning in the House the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy, Minister for Women's Policy and Minister for Fair Trading referred to new bridges over the Georgina River at Camooweal. No doubt the Minister is well aware that just last week a road train belonging to Road Trains of Australia that was carrying a load of six decks of stud Brahman bulls from the Rockhampton sale was forced off the Barkly Highway between Camooweal and Mount Isa because somebody in another wide vehicle had not put the wings up. That forced the road train over the edge.

These are the sorts of things we are fighting for. I know that the Minister for Transport—I did it, too, and I continue to do it—is making representation to the Federal Government for more funding for that road. We are talking about not only the Barkly Highway but also every other road in this State. If we are going to have quality products marketed and sold throughout this State, on the domestic market nationally and on the international market, we have to make absolutely certain that we are going to get that product to the marketplace in the best possible condition. Again, it comes back to dollars. I know that the dollars are tight but, at the end of the day, if we are to comply with this type of legislation we have to ensure that the associated infrastructure is practical and that it is possible for people to adhere to the regulations.
