



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR CALLIDE

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STOCK STEALING

Mr SEENEY (Callide—NPA) (11.55 a.m.): The stealing of stock has been romanticised by some as cattle duffing or poddy dodging, but there can be no doubt that stock stealing is as much a crime as is stealing any other type of another person's property. The number of reported incidents of cattle theft has increased dramatically with the current good prices and the shortage of stock, with the number of reported incidents almost doubling in the last calendar year compared with a similar period last year. Yet it has become obvious from the questions that I have asked in this parliament that there is very little chance of cattle thieves being caught in Queensland today. By the minister's own admission, Queensland has become a cattle thieves' paradise.

It has become obvious that Queensland stock owners can expect very little help from the Queensland police force if their stock are stolen, and they have almost no chance at all of having those stock recovered. They simply must suffer the financial loss or take the matter into their own hands, and that is regrettable. That has been clearly illustrated by a reply to my question on notice No. 4, wherein the Police Minister informed the parliament that the average clear-up rate for investigations into cattle theft for this year was just five per cent. A miserable five per cent of the incidents reported this year have been cleared up. Over the last three years, the clear-up rate has averaged just 14 per cent. That is the average clear-up rate, not the successful prosecution rate. We are still waiting for those figures.

There can be no justification for this failure to enforce the law in Queensland. There can no justification for this failure to protect the assets of Queensland's primary producers. It is, I believe, another indication of the very low priority given by the state government to anything to do with rural Queensland and primary production. It is another example of the lack of substance behind the rhetoric of governing for all Queenslanders.

The minister's answer also revealed that the Queensland police force has a Stock Squad with 23 positions of which 18 are operational positions. That would seem to be a very small Stock Squad, considering the size of Queensland and its livestock-based industries. But the absurdity of it is that, of those 18 operational positions, nine are currently vacant and have been for some time. It is no wonder then that with a Stock Squad at half strength and a dramatic rise in reported stock stealing cases, our clear-up rate is running at 5 per cent of reported cases.

Primary production of all types is an increasingly risky business, and no business can afford the loss of an asset that has been grown or bred or built up at considerable cost to the owner. Primary producers have every right to expect that the law enforcement agencies in this state will be properly resourced to ensure that they enjoy the same level of investigation and prosecution for crime in their areas as is achieved in respect to the inexcusable stealing of assets in other cases of illegal activity.

The Queensland Stock Squad has been allowed to run down over the last three years to a point where it is hardly operating at all. A 5 per cent clear-up rate is certainly no deterrent to would-be cattle thieves and would—and should—be unacceptable in any other area of crime. It is regrettable that some rural organisations which should be unashamedly representing the interests of Queensland cattlemen have been conveniently quiet and compliant on this issue, much to the Police Minister's relief and the state Labor government's delight. The minister's response last week to appoint two new coordinator positions is woefully inadequate and will not on its own do much to solve the staffing problem.

The Queensland police force needs to recognise the special skills needed to be an effective part of the Stock Squad, and officers who have those skills must be paid at a level which rewards and

recognises their specialised skills, just as officers in many other areas are paid and rewarded for their specialised skills. That should have been happening before now. It should have been recognised that the effectiveness of the Stock Squad was being lost long before this point of complete failure was reached. There needs to be an active recruitment program to reverse the run-down that has occurred since this Labor government came to power. That recruitment program needs to focus on recruiting qualified people who have the right background and to whom stock recognition and handling skills are second nature.

It must be recognised that in the livestock industries and in the agricultural colleges of this state there are many people with what are very specialised skills who can and would make excellent Stock Squad officers if their skills were recognised and properly rewarded. The Police Minister's proposal to dramatically increase the penalties for stock stealing is long overdue and it would be welcome if the Stock Squad was able to investigate and prosecute stock thieves. At the moment it is clearly not doing that, and with a clear-up rate of five per cent the penalties are almost irrelevant. No-one is being prosecuted, no-one is being caught and no-one is being convicted.

All Queensland stock owners can, however, be assured that we will continue to raise this issue in this parliament until the Stock Squad is returned to full strength. We will continue to raise this issue until this problem is resolved.
