



Speech by

KERRY SHINE

MEMBER FOR TOOWOOMBA NORTH

Hansard 16 October 2001

PRIMARY INDUSTRIES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr SHINE (Toowoomba North—ALP) (3.44 p.m.): It is a pleasure to speak to the Primary Industries Legislation Amendment Bill, as I am a member of the minister's rural council formed after the last state election. Although I represent an electorate that is based principally on a provincial city, the connections between Toowoomba North, Toowoomba generally and rural and regional Australia are strong indeed. Many people who reside in that city have come from the Darling Downs or the south-west and other regions surrounding the city of Toowoomba. It has a close and real connection with the land.

There are two aspects that I wish to touch on with respect to this legislation that are of a general nature. They relate to a task that I had the pleasure of performing for the Minister for Primary Industries in attending the launch of the Australian Catholic Bishops Social Justice Statement a week or two ago and also a task that I had to perform recently for the Premier in opening an extension to the Woolworths distribution centre at Warwick. I believe both of these issues touch very much on primary industry and rural and regional Queensland.

However, before addressing those matters I congratulate the minister on the preparatory work done by him and his department with respect to this bill, which is aimed at better regulation of primary industry in Queensland, particularly as it touches on grain research, the chicken meat industry, the timber industry, veterinary surgeons, the meat industry and the sugar industry. A lot of work goes into these types of bills, and I congratulate the minister on the effort that has been made to bring provisions covering these primary industries up to scratch in the 21st century.

As I said, by their nature, these types of bills are concerned primarily with country and provincial—that is, rural and regional—Queensland. By definition, rural and regional Queensland comprises the 30 per cent of the population who live on farms or in cities or towns in locations with populations probably under about the 50,000 mark. There are a lot of those situated on or near the Darling Downs.

As I said, I recently had the privilege of representing the minister at the launch by His Lordship Bishop William Morris, the Bishop of Toowoomba, of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Social Justice Sunday Statement for 2001. The statement this year is titled 'A just and peaceful land: rural and regional Australia in 2001'. Bishop Morris' message stated—

As the statement highlights, Catholic Social Teaching regards the problems of rural communities in the context of social justice based on human dignity rather than in the framework of mere economic activity. It focuses repeatedly on rural-urban equity, the personal worth of farmers and rural people and the requirements of stewardship of God's creation.

In other words, economic considerations are not the only things for consideration. This morning I noted with some pleasure that the Premier, in referring to the late William Gunn, quoted his comment that in order for people to be encouraged to stay in country areas amenities have to be supplied by government. These are all comments and arguments supporting the same thing.

Rural and regional Australia in 2001 has become a topic of grave concern to this government, to all responsible governments in Australia and all church bodies. Things have changed greatly in regional and rural Australia over the past few decades, as we all should know. Technology has developed to the point at which farming is now a science. Key regional and rural primary industry

groups have dissolved and re-formed into other organisations and new industry and interest groups have had to form to protect the interests of farmers and rural and regional Australian citizens.

Amidst all this change there is growing concern that rural urban equity is slowly being lost in the world of globalisation and computerisation and, more alarmingly, that some Australian farmers feel that they are losing their personal worth in society. The launch that I attended on behalf of the minister highlighted the serious problems in regional and rural Australia generally and, of course, in Queensland. From what was said at the launch, clearly people concerned with these issues—the church, the state government and Australian society generally—have every reason to express those concerns about the future of the bush.

For example, 33 of the 37 poorest federal electorates in Australia are rural electorates. The rate of avoidable deaths in regional and rural Australia is 40 per cent higher than that of capital cities. Influenza and pneumonia rates are 94 per cent more frequent among rural women than urban women. Respiratory diseases are 71 per cent higher. Genital urinary diseases are 86 per cent higher. There has been a drastic increase in the reported incidence of substance abuse, low morale, depression, suicides and attempted suicides among Australia's rural and regional people. Aged care is a major issue. So, too, is youth unemployment, the drastic drop in the number of students who proceed to tertiary studies and the provision of services such as banks, doctors and post offices.

In a community of people who feel deserted and who are losing hope, that church and other church bodies have stepped up to hear their pain and believe in their dreams and be a source of some symbol of hope. This is what the launch of that social justice statement was all about. Clearly, the state government also has a role to play—and has played a role—in restoring the bush. This legislation goes part of the way towards achieving that aim. The Queensland government is committed to protecting the interests of the people to whom the act specifically applies.

However, undeniably there are still problems in rural and regional Queensland, as I have indicated before, and those problems will exist for some time yet. Sometimes politicians are accused of being ignorant or uncaring. In particular, as we approach a federal election, rural and regional Queensland is concerned that election promises will concentrate on national and, indeed, international security and the failures of major Australian companies, which have left thousands unemployed. People in rural and regional Australia are worried that their needs will be left back in the shadows. So I urge all federal candidates to remember the bush and all regional and rural Queenslanders to keep making their voices heard.

In regard to the Queensland government, I believe that we have heard those voices. We are working—and this bill is an example of that—to improve the quality of life in the bush. This legislation is an acknowledgment that things are changing in the bush and that the government's legislation and actions should reflect that.

Personally, my own dream for the future to help rural and regional Australia is to see an increase in actual decentralisation. I made reference to that in my maiden speech. I believe that fair dinkum efforts along those lines should always be promoted. While I am in this place I intend to play my part towards that end. I believe that if companies and government departments were to move their major offices into regional and rural Queensland they would bring with them more business, transport, amenities and services for local residents. This in turn would lift the economic sustainability of regional and rural Australia as well as the morale, for example, of farmers and citizens of the regional towns. I believe that the government has taken steps along those lines. For example, a number of government offices are situated throughout country Queensland and substantial portions of existing government departments are already situated all over the state. However, I am proposing something more dramatic than that.

In the non-government area, the state government can still play a part. As I said at the outset, I had the pleasure of representing the Premier at the official opening of a \$30 million expansion of the Big W distribution centre in Warwick recently. I understand that the state government, through the Department of State Development, played quite a significant part in the decision of Big W to initially set up in Warwick and, more recently, to expand its distribution centre by about 100 per cent. The new centre covers more than 63,000 square metres, all under the one roof. It is huge. It makes it one of the largest distribution centres in Australia.

That centre is a perfect example of decentralisation at work. There are certain physical conditions favouring it in the sense of its location in Warwick, being on the New England Highway, the major inland route from Brisbane to Sydney, and the Cunningham Highway, linking the Newell Highway, the major route from Brisbane to Melbourne. As I understand it, goods with a retail value of \$1 billion a year will be brought in, mainly through the port of Brisbane, and distributed from Warwick to Big W stores from Canberra to Cairns. This integral role that Warwick is about to play has already proven to be beneficial to all of the residents in Warwick and surrounding districts, particularly in terms of employment.

Prior to the expansion, Big W established a local recruitment policy and staff training program with the Warwick College of the Southern Queensland Institute of TAFE. The government has been fostering this form of decentralisation not only through the Department of State Development but also through the Department of Employment and Training. Today there are 230 people, including 40 trainees, employed at the distribution centre. Not only was it good for the local employment rate but it will also mean that more pay packets will be spent in the local economy.

The other benefits that Warwick has reaped since the opening of the expanded centre include work for transport operators and extra business for local retailers, motels and tourism operators. Finally, as a finishing touch, the Big W distribution centre has further added to Warwick's rose capital image with a 350 metre rose garden along the front boundary. All of this is an example of how decentralisation is helping to strengthen a regional Queensland town. It is an example of the government being proactive in its support for private industry to establish these industries in regional Queensland.

As I mentioned earlier, it has been part of my dream to see a similar project occur in my electorate of Toowoomba North with respect to the expansion of the Department of Primary Industries base. My preference is for the transfer of a substantial part of its operations from Brisbane to Toowoomba in the future. There are numerous reasons why this move would, in my view, be beneficial: from the brilliant position of Toowoomba to other regional areas, to the present track record of the administration of Toowoomba's DPI and to the groundbreaking research that has occurred over recent years. The model for such a move—and one does exist—is Agriculture New South Wales. Its primary office was shifted quite successfully from Sydney to Orange in the late 1980s to the advantage not just of the New South Wales government but, importantly, the primary producers in that state.

There are of course obstacles in such a proposal, and one would not seek to minimise them. Nevertheless, if there is a will, the positive aspects of such a proposal greatly outweigh the negatives. At some other time I hope to develop that argument in more detail. However, the advantages for places like Brisbane, which is suffering from overcrowding and congestion and the costs associated, for example, in moving people to and from the city, can be obviated to a certain degree by the active encouragement of the transfer of these sorts of institutions to regional Queensland.

Undeniably, there is a major problem in all areas of rural and regional Australia. The statistics I mentioned earlier are the hard, material evidence that unfortunately proves this. But it is the loss of hope and desperate cries from these people that drive this point home, and drive it home hard. The Queensland government is doing what it can to address their changing needs, and this legislation plays a small but necessary role in that effort. We need to pay close attention to the changing face of the bush. We need to search for more affordable solutions to these problems. We need to act now before some people lose all hope. I commend the bill to the House.
