



Speech by

Mr M. HORAN

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PRIMARY INDUSTRIES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr HORAN (Toowoomba South—NPA) (Leader of the Opposition) (4.30 p.m.): This Primary Industries Legislation Amendment Bill is an omnibus bill that contains a large number of amendments to legislation relating to primary industries that operate in various rural communities. I state at the outset that primary industries is very important to this decentralised state of Queensland and makes a great contribution to our export industry. Over the past five years, total exports from Australia have increased from some \$96 billion to around \$154 billion a year. That is not just primary production; that includes mining and other exports. However, that figure gives a good indication of the importance of the export industry to our state and the important role that primary production plays in that industry.

However, there is a sad note to that. We have heard previous speakers talk about support for primary industry so that it can create change, provide flexibility, provide new opportunities, provide quality assurance assistance and so forth. Since the Beattie Labor government came to power in Queensland, we have seen from the Department of Primary Industries a combined loss of jobs, or jobs forgone, of some 550. That is jobs promised and not delivered and jobs gone. In some areas, the stock inspector is almost an endangered species. It is hard to find stock inspectors who can provide assistance and support. Members opposite talk about providing assistance and support to primary producers. That is a great example of how support has been ripped out of primary industries. In many cases, people in primary industries have been left on their own to achieve growth in their industry to the best of their ability.

There has been a lot of change in rural areas. Previously, I mentioned exports. An interesting fact is that Australia now exports more wine to Great Britain than does France. Areas such as the South Burnett, the Darling Downs, Tamborine Mountain and many other parts of Queensland that previously were not considered grape-growing areas along with the more traditional grape-growing areas such as Stanthorpe, St George, Roma and other parts of the state, particularly up in the North Burnett, are expanding their operations. The wine industry is becoming not only a possible export industry for those areas but also a tourism industry. That is a good example of the sort of flexibility that can be created in primary industries.

To have flexibility in rural Queensland, we need infrastructure and we need water. Since the advent of the Beattie Labor government, not one single dam has been built in this state. Places such as St George, Goondiwindi, Gympie and the Atherton Tableland have created flexibility through the provision of water. In those areas, if a producer experiences a tough time in one industry or if their product is not in demand, they can change to other industries. People in those areas can move into value-adding industries, grow different types of crops, or perhaps move from broadacre farming to horticulture. That is where the real potential in this state lies. However, the Labor government has missed the boat totally. It takes years to develop these projects. Some four years have passed and virtually not one single dam has been put in place or commenced. That an absolute abrogation of the government's duty.

It is no wonder that Queensland has the worst unemployment rate in mainland Australia. Infrastructure such as dams, and particularly the Paradise Dam that was built in the western area of Bundaberg, can deliver jobs for young people, can provide extra opportunity, can allow for increased production, and can provide jobs not only for the smart people that Mr Beattie likes to talk about but also for average workers, such as people who want to do picking, loading, carting or driving trucks, or people in small businesses who want to be selling more pipe and irrigation supplies and so forth. The

government does not understand the fundamentals of what helps our decentralised state, what can bring about additional exports, what can bring about a whole range of flexibility, research stations and small business—all the sorts of opportunities that go with the provision of adequate water—and that is a real problem. A great potential has been missed.

We have heard about how change can be difficult, and it can be extremely difficult for people on the land, particularly people who have been there for generations. Young people who have been through the agricultural colleges, the pastoral colleges and university are now coming onto the land and bringing with them new skills. They want the opportunity to be able to put those skills into practice. Those young people are very skilled in high-technology planning, laser levelling activities, tram tracking and high-tech planting equipment where seven or eight different operations can be done in one go, be it the planting of the seed, the moisture, the fertiliser, the chemicals, tillage, hilling up and so forth. This new generation of young farmers is very highly skilled. They need opportunity, and that gets back to what I spoke about in regard to water.

It is interesting to see some young women coming through the colleges and going into the cotton industry. They have taken active roles in bug detection, in the selling of chemicals, working for agents, working in management and in financing and exporting. It really is very encouraging to see the ability of these young people.

But there is change, and change is very difficult for people on the land. It is their home—maybe it was their parents' home—and they have lived in the district. It is very difficult for them to adjust to change. In recent decades we have seen change occur on the downs. People on smaller grain blocks once grew one crop a year and made a reasonable living from that. That has now changed. They have to double crop, they have to have larger properties, they have to have bigger machinery. That is all very costly and, coupled with the drought over the past 10 years or so, it has been exceptionally difficult for some people.

Owing to the good management of the Australian economy, there are now consistently low interest rates—probably for the longest time that we have known—a low rate of inflation and a low dollar, which helps the export industry. There has been some improvement in commodity prices. Recently, beef prices have increased. That increase has been aided not only by the low dollar but also by flexibility in the industry. The previous speaker talked about live cattle exports. Once exporters have a number of markets, they can set a base for the price of their product. When cattle in the north are going to reasonably good live cattle markets, that means that there are fewer cattle going to the fatteners down south. That creates an increase in the base price of beef for those who are selling on the domestic market.

At the same time many of Australia's primary producers have been able to develop new markets. Once we relied mostly on Japan and the USA—the USA for cow beef and Japan for the better cuts of beef. Now other markets have opened up. There are now live cattle markets to places such as Korea, Taiwan and China. That all helps bring about price improvement, which allows young people to come back into the industry. The industry is now starting to do repairs and it is putting new machinery and other equipment in place. That means that light engineering companies in regional country towns are doing better. On the weekend I saw a huge semitrailer load of cattle crushes coming from somewhere near Ipswich. The manufacture of that sort of product really creates jobs.

Grain prices have been okay, although I would not put it at any better than that. Cotton prices have dropped back a bit. The real problem in many of the grain-growing areas of Queensland has been the drought. Vast areas around Dalby, the Darling Downs, Chinchilla, Wandoan, Taroom and other parts of the state are dreadfully affected by drought.

I pay tribute to the federal minister for the exceptional circumstances grant. It was a very difficult process and he went out of his way to make it work. He went out of his way to make it fit the guidelines that were put in place by the state and federal ministers some years before. Now he has been able to put what one might call the icing on the cake. Drought declarations were already in place and I note that certain support mechanisms have been implemented. On top of that, the introduction of exceptional circumstances declarations give the additional support of lower interest rate assistance. That has been very good.

About a week ago, the federal government provided a very significant sum of money over a number of years to Lifeline in Toowoomba. Lifeline will be able to continue the counselling that it has been undertaking. That has been good. Also in Toowoomba, for many years Bush Connections has played a very good role in helping people to adjust and settle after major change.

We have seen the most change in some of the intensive industries. A couple of decades ago the pig industry moved away from being based on smaller studs. Now it is very much based on modern genetics and major intensive pork production. For example, it has focused on such things as individual production per sow in terms of the number of litters per year, weaned weights and so forth, feeding techniques, feed technology and veterinary practices. The pork industry made quite an incredible

change. About three or four years ago the pork industry went through a difficult time. Now it is good to see that the export side of the pork industry has provided some good assistance to that industry.

The dairy industry has gone through the greatest change in recent times. There has been a great deal said about that and a lot of vitriol has been slung around from side to side. We should recognise that a package was put together by the federal government valued at almost \$2 billion. That package recognised the original amount that was put together on the advice of the dairy industry itself, which was based on a levy system in the retail price of milk and which had to be underwritten by the Commonwealth government. The original package would have meant that farmers could be subject to taxation, so the amount was increased to cover that. A further increase was made to cover farmers who were particularly disadvantaged by the changes to the quota system as opposed to those farmers who had relied mostly on manufacturing milk. The federal government has gone out of its way to do that.

We all know the true basis of deregulation. Whatever either side might like to say, one of the important tenets of the Australian Constitution, which we celebrate 100 years of this year, is that primary producers are able to sell their products across interstate borders without penalty. That started in 1988. A system has existed in Australia of voluntary regulation, and for decades the Victorian industry had agreed that they would not sell interstate in return for a subsidy that was paid to the Victorian farmers. Then they made the decision to deregulate and the other states had to decide to deregulate. The federal government followed with the compensation package.

We all have to admit that that deregulation process caused tremendous pain to dairy farmers in Queensland, New South Wales and, perhaps, Western Australia. The Victorians have benefited. I hear that they are getting a better price for their milk. The previous speaker spoke about Australia's dairy exports valuing some \$2.2 billion. The bulk of that comes from the Victorian industry, but that could have a flow-on effect to us if those good prices continue. There is potential here in Queensland. The cheese making plant that is being constructed on the Atherton Tableland and other specific products being developed in other parts of the state have the potential to provide exports and help the dairy price. It has been an extremely difficult time. At the last election, the member for Hinchinbrook announced our policy of providing financial support that would have assisted the farmers. It was very disappointing to see that the state government did nothing at a time when the good people of this industry needed help, as this whole thing knocked a lot of them for six.

At the moment, the price of milk is gradually creeping up a little. It still has some way to go. Maybe by the end of next winter the dairy farmers might be getting closer to making a living from the dairy industry. Pauls has worked closely with some groups to try to increase the payment that it makes. There is a move towards having a single price system that is based purely on production, rather than breaking it up into too many segments. That will probably be of some advantage. We must do all that we can to help the dairy industry and those families who have had to go through enormous change and adjustment, a significant drop in income and, in many cases, social dislocation.

I wish to talk about some veterinary matters and a meat matter, which others have spoken about. This bill makes some changes to the Veterinary Surgeons Act. One of the changes that concerns us is the change to the ownership of a veterinary business. We have all seen the change that is happening in the retail sector of our communities. The big supermarkets, Woolworths, Coles, and so forth have gradually taken over. They are moving into service stations, and fruit and vegetables. They want to get into pharmacy but we have been able to keep them out of that so far. They want to be newsagents, they want white goods, they want clothes. Like the great white shark, they want to take the lot. We have to watch this very carefully.

For example—and the Minister should correct me if I am wrong—under this legislation Woolworths could open a veterinary practice attached to one of its stores and have a voucher system for 5c a litre off fuel at the servo next door. Before we know it, we have moved away from the principles and the policies that the National Party has of supporting small business and allowing for family-owned small businesses. Instead, we will move into the bigger conglomerate, corporate operations that, ultimately, will not be good for the profession and will not be good for small business. A small business that is able to operate on its own is ultimately better for an area than one big organisation that employs people virtually on wages.

Mr Palaszczuk: I will respond to that.

Mr HORAN: That would be appreciated. I turn to the matter of meat exports, and particularly assistance from the government and the Premier on a very important aspect.

I understand that some supermarkets or some meat importing organisations in Japan have sought the Premier's imprimatur on the quality of the beef that is exported from Queensland. At this time, a BSE scare exists in Japan. I think that they found one Japanese cow with BSE. To overcome any buyer resistance in the Japanese culture, it is very important that that imprimatur be given. I know that one has to be responsible in giving something like that. One has to have the advice of veterinarians, AQIS and so on to say that one's information is correct.

We all know that we have very stringent systems for inspection and clean and green policies and so forth. I understand, although I could stand corrected, that the Premier of Tasmania has done something like that with respect to Tasmanian beef. If we are looking at enhancing Queensland's export capacity, this could be an avenue that should be followed up. Marketing can be about perceptions. If we have the confidence and faith in our product to be able to stand up and say, 'Yes, we have a good product,' we should do everything possible to back that up.

My colleague the member for Gregory spoke well about small slaughterhouses and butcher shops in country towns. I know from my travels that there are some very good operations there. We just need some commonsense in dealing with those, that is, to still have the right level of quality control, but to do it properly. They are not huge works such as that at Dinmore, which puts through 4,000 head a week; they employ three or four apprentices and a couple of butchers in their town and they are very important.

My colleague the shadow minister, the member for Hinchinbrook, spoke about some of the concerns in the veterinary profession and about the need for universities and governments to look at incentives to get vets to go where they are needed in large animal practice instead of overseas to Great Britain. If ever there is an outbreak of disease in large animals in Queensland, we will need every single vet who is experienced in large animal practice to provide a barrier to the disease and treatment if needed.
