



Speech by

## RAY HOPPER

### MEMBER FOR DARLING DOWNS

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#### FIRST SPEECH

**Mr HOPPER** (Darling Downs—Ind) (11.31 a.m.): Mr Speaker, it is indeed an honour and a privilege to stand here today as the elected member for Darling Downs. I sincerely thank my constituents for their support and trust, but most of all I wish to thank my wife, Jo-anne, my daughter Jodi, my daughter Amy, and my son, Ben. I love you. I wish to thank my band of loyal workers for their unwavering efforts in the weeks leading up to my election.

Having been born in Jandowae and raised on the farm, which I proudly own today, my early schooling was done at Cooranga North, a small country school where, I am proud to say, my three children attend today—a one-teacher school with an active P&C of which I had the honour of being the president for a number of years. Our small community is extremely tight knit through numerous community events and was dairy farming heartland bordering the rich agricultural belt known as the Darling Downs. Our property has been a dairy farm since the 19th century and my children are the fifth generation of Hoppers to milk cows on this property.

It saddens me that this coming Saturday almost a 100 years of family tradition will come to an end when the last dairy cow is trucked out. Deregulation of the dairy industry has totally destroyed the most viable source of income for our family farm. Being a ward representative for the Dairy Farmers Cooperative for some three and a half years has given me vast experience and knowledge of the dairy industry, thus enabling me to see the process of destruction that national competition policy and the ensuing dairy deregulation has caused to our farm, farmers and farm families. When the banks foreclose on a farm, the occupants not only lose their property; they lose their livelihood, they lose their home, their pride and everything they have worked for. Mr Speaker, I ask you to try to realise the pain of telling your children that their ponies will have to be sold, not to mention what happens to the family pet—the working dog—who cannot be placed at the time of an eviction.

In my dairy ward there were between 30 and 40 dairy farms three years ago. Today there are 13. At this time I am working hard with an ex-dairying family, encouraging and supporting them in an endeavour to give them hope in life. Unfortunately, farmers seem to adopt a sense of failure and shame when they can no longer support their families as they have traditionally. This often leads to self-abuse through alcohol or worse. Families can fall apart quickly when financial ruin hits after years of solid, happy, secure income because of a regulated marketplace.

Globalisation has been the most disastrous event ever to hit this great nation that my forebears died to protect. Multinationals and big business are continuing to grow fat at the expense of producers. I acknowledge that we have to compete globally, but not at the expense of our producers. I am afraid that the level playing field is level only at one end. When a farmer harvests a crop or milks a cow, he creates a product—a new product which is then sold. The point I am getting at is that this farmer is part of the productive sector, the wealth creators of our state. With this part of our productive sector being squeezed the way it is, the very source of our state's wealth is being diminished, with the inevitable flow-on result being disaster for the farming industry and subsequently for our state.

There are rumblings of staff cuts within the Department of Primary Industries. I shudder at the thought. It is imperative that we keep our DPI staff members employed within the dairy industry. The financial advice and counselling given by Target 10 staff has been an invaluable lifeline to our milk producers. Those staff have built up personal relationships with the farming communities with which

they deal and it is absolutely imperative that they stay in this time of great need. I urge Premier Beattie and all other members to please help our dairy industry before it is too late. It is already too late for some.

As members are no doubt aware, two of the four shires in my electorate are officially drought declared, and it is imperative that we lobby our federal government for exceptional circumstance assistance urgently. The criteria to achieve this assistance need to be more realistic and softened somewhat.

The government's jobs, jobs, jobs policy can be achieved only if we support our productive sector when times are tough. We need incentives for shop owners and small businesses in rural areas. When rural decline hits, our country towns bear the full brunt. During the past 10 years of drought, many shops and small businesses have gone to the wall, and I urge our government to show leniency and support for our rural businesses. Our public servants need to be given incentives, such as higher wages, to transfer to rural areas. We need real policies to get people back to the bush—policies that stop the banks demanding higher deposits for people wishing to buy a home in a country town as opposed to one in the city.

Mr Speaker, where does the wheat come from that makes your bread, the milk and corn for your cornflakes, the barley for your beer? From the bush, from farms! Tax incentives are vital for rural areas. We need real work for the dole to help employers to source extra, experienced labour. Why not pay an employer to employ someone rather than pay him or her not to work?

My property at Cooranga North is bordered by the dingo barrier fence on two sides, running for some three to four kilometres. It is absolutely essential that we find extra funding to maintain this once great icon of Queensland—an icon which protects much of our valuable sheep and cattle lands from the ravages of dingoes and wild dogs but, sadly, an icon that is fast becoming useless. Until my election, I was employed as a dogger for the Wambo Shire, working in the Bell, Cooranga North, Jimbour and Diamondy districts, and this has given me a considerable insight into and knowledge of the habits of the dingo. The ravages of this pest are becoming enormous. On one property alone, they have killed 20 calves and bitten another 14. This means this producer has been unable to sell 34 weaners out of a herd of 100 in this one year. So, Mr Speaker, can you see that the producer has lost one-third of his annual income?

I have studied the number of dingoes over the past 15 years. At this time, they are in plague proportions. You might ask why. A lot of it is to do with our federal government's gun laws. The gun is a tool of trade to the man on the land and he must be allowed to carry it with him from sun-up to sundown. On so many occasions recently I have missed being able to shoot a dingo because I had to go home, get the key to the gun cabinet, unlock it, unlock the gun bolt, unlock the ammunition, put it all together, and go back only to find that the dingo had gone. This is just part of our pitiful gun laws that needs to be addressed immediately. If these dingoes ever get into our sheep country in the proportions that they are on my side of the barrier fence, they will wipe out the wool industry in Queensland. The restoration of our barrier fence needs to be given top priority.

Another major problem developing on the Darling Downs is law and order. Crime is becoming a major issue and we need more police to patrol and protect our homes and businesses. When I say 'police', I mean police; not revenue raisers—police who are combating crime rather than chasing motorists who have a defective windscreen label or numberplate that is defective because of the shoddy product that is being supplied to our Transport Department and then sold to our motorists. We have to have harsher penalties for home invasion of any kind. We need to be able to protect ourselves and our families without the fear of going to jail because we have inflicted harm on some low-life who has entered our home or business to commit a crime. We need to be able to name juvenile offenders who continually reoffend. This will surely help to deter further offences. At present, they treat the law with contempt.

The water pipeline project to bring waste water to the Lockyer Valley and the Darling Downs is a scheme of utmost importance to my electorate. This project would be a first for Brisbane and a wonderful outcome for the environment. However, we must protect the cost to our farmers who will use this waste water rather than having it pumped into our beautiful ocean and polluting our beaches. Bearing in mind the benefits to the environment, I am sure that each Brisbane ratepayer would be prepared to pay an extra \$50 in rates to see the project come to fruition. You may say, 'Let the farmer pay,' but the farmers will also be up for major expense at the other end to build ring tanks to hold the water, irrigation and infrastructure to disperse the water as well as paying the annual costs of pumping, et cetera. This needs to be a cooperative effort, as it will benefit Brisbane and the bush.

WAMP, or the Water Allegation Management Plan, is a disaster waiting to happen and for many a disaster that has already happened. The past 10 years have been the driest on record for much of the Darling Downs. We are seeing plans made on what has happened over this dry period, but when history repeats itself—which it always does—we may well see three or four floods in one year from our river systems into the Murray-Darling catchment.

The point I am making is that the farmer who has been issued a water allocation sets his farming capabilities according to the cash flow that will be produced by the allocation. You cannot then come along and take that allocation away without sending those producers to the wall. WAMP is already proving a disaster to many earthmoving contractors as all dam building and associated works have ceased. They have to make payments on their equipment, let alone feed their families, and they have not turned a wheel for over six months. Surely we must show some compassion for those people. A possible solution to many of those problems would be an immediate announcement to commence the construction of the water pipeline, as that would reduce the need for water from parts of our river systems, get the earthmoving contractors back to work and increase productivity from drought-affected farms.

Families are the lifeblood of our state and we must fight hard to protect them and to promote family values. I wish to see strong incentives given to help those families who wish to keep one parent at home. Children need the stability of a good family life and if we can achieve this by one parent staying home rather than have the children cared for by others, then so much the better. Please do not get me wrong: I realise that there are many families, including one-parent families, who have no option but to use those facilities. However, I am a firm believer that a solid upbringing in a stable environment leaves a long-lasting impression on our children—an impression that will last them through childhood, adolescence and adulthood and that will feed through to the community creating stability and wealth for our state.

Our health is of major importance and in the Darling Downs electorate we need an injection of funds into the Dalby, Jandowae, Crows Nest and Oakey Hospitals. Many of our elderly citizens have to travel to Toowoomba or Brisbane for treatment. This can be traumatic and very wearing. We soon find many older people moving away from their homes, families and friends to be closer to the care facilities that they need. I take my hat off to our rural doctors, nurses and care workers who work tirelessly in our communities, often times having to travel considerable distances.

Other services lacking facilities include our small one-teacher schools, and this should not be the case. The workload put on the principals of those schools is enormous. They find themselves overwhelmed by the workload and so move on after only a couple of years. The flow-on result of this continuous change is that the children have to adjust to a new teacher every year or so, sometimes more often.

Another factor concerning families in rural areas is that many have no alternative but to use school buses. If they choose to use a private school in the town rather than the state school, they are charged a fee to travel from the state school to the private school. The charge for those buses varies greatly. For parents with a number of children who choose this option, the annual costs are quite prohibitive. When children are being bussed to town, the Transport Department should be responsible for the additional kilometre or so required.

I also bring to the attention of the House the need for a second range crossing for Toowoomba. At present, 1,200 trucks per day travel through the centre of the city and up or down a treacherous route, as do many other vehicles that use the same route. It is only a matter of time before a major accident occurs. It is imperative that funding for the proposed second crossing is expedited before a disaster occurs. It could well be a loved one of you or I who is killed—no matter who it is, they will be someone's loved one.

Telecommunications is another problem in my electorate, especially in relation to mobile phones. Pressure must be placed on Telstra to improve services in the bush. The mobile phone with which I was issued, although much appreciated, is useless at home and in many parts of my electorate of the Darling Downs as coverage is very scarce and dead spots are everywhere. No doubt mine will be the least-used phone of the 89 that were issued to members of this parliament. Telstra assures me that all I need is a good aerial, but I have not worked out which end of the horse I should put it on!

Tree-clearing laws pose a great threat to the livelihood of some producers, especially those who bought land but, because of the drought conditions over the past 10 years, have not had the financial viability to develop their properties, which would include land clearing and the replacement of certain trees with more suitable varieties. Those people must be compensated for the restrictions that are now being imposed on them. The majority of farmers are environmentally friendly, with tree replanting, contour farming, koala corridors and tree line windbreaks being part of their development plans. Farmers must be given every chance to have input into changes of legislation that affect their livelihood.

I ask our government to be generous in dealing with the shires within the Darling Downs electorate when it comes to road funding. The shires of Crows Nest, Jondaryan, Rosalie, Wambo and Dalby have extensive road networks to maintain. Droughts followed by flood rains have caused havoc to roads and services. They all need funding injections if they are to have any hope of maintaining the existing infrastructure. One shire is already having to revert some of its previously sealed roads back to gravel as it is unable to maintain the sealed surfaces. An initiative of one of the shires, which I consider

should be applauded and followed, is to require that all new homes must be equipped with a large rainwater tank. That would not only promote the saving of water but also would help to educate people to be more conservative in water usage. I recommend the plan to all councils.

Another matter that is impacting heavily on our farming industry is the impost of the state fuel tax of 8.354c per litre or \$83.54 on every 1,000 litres of fuel purchased. One thousand litres of fuel lasts approximately 17.25 hours in a 400 horsepower tractor, which is less than two 10-hour working days. What a great boost to the state economy this windfall must be, and it is just another kick for our farmers as they are going down. The tax is supposedly rebated as part of the diesel fuel rebate scheme, but who is kidding whom? Before the introduction of the tax, we were getting a rebate of some 32.33c per litre on fuel costing 60c to 65c. We are now paying 74.62c plus state tax of 8.354c, making a total of 82.976c, and receiving a rebate of 38.1c.

I also point to the ludicrous form that farmers have to fill in to register for the state fuel tax rebate for on-road farm vehicles. I defy fellow members to fill in that form without any bureaucratic coaching, and get it right. Many farmers have given up trying to claim the rebate because of the hassles involved. It is just another bit of paper warfare that the government is winning.

The final point I wish to make, and one which may be considered controversial as it will affect many people, is in relation to the dairy industry. Before I purchased our farm, I was employed for nine years in the meat industry and was a member of the very active meatworkers union. During that time I saw what was achieved by the right to strike. Although I realise the disastrous consequences that some strikes have had on the power industry, the airline industry and the wharves to name a few, I think it may come to a point where the Queensland dairy industry must become militant. I dearly love the dairy industry and it grieves me to see it in the parlous state that it is in today. I feel that our dairy farmers have now reached the point where, if they are to achieve an outcome, it will be necessary for them to withhold milk supplies for an extended period.

Last year milk was worth 58.9c per litre to the farmer and now it is being sold in the low 30s. Our farmers are going to have to lead and lead they will if they are pushed any further by the ludicrous results of National Competition Policy. I plead for our state government to make our dairy farmers a top priority and put an end to the destruction being imposed on our dairy industry.

Yesterday, Pat Purcell, the member for Bulimba, said what a great electorate he has. I invite Mr Purcell to come and look at my precious Darling Downs. In finishing, I pledge my allegiance to the Queen and to this great nation, the Commonwealth of Australia. Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank you and all members for your time.

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