



Speech by

HOWARD HOBBS

MEMBER FOR WARREGO

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SUGAR INDUSTRY

Mr HOBBS (Warrego—NPA) (6.45 p.m.): The sugar industry is one of Queensland's major industries, employing thousands of Queenslanders. The industry is in crisis, and the 2002 sugar pool price is estimated to be \$230 to \$280 per tonne. As has been mentioned here tonight, the government has not pulled its weight on sugar issues. The amendment moved by the government tonight is an absolute disgrace. It talks about positive initiatives of the Queensland government in relation to the sugar industry, but nothing is happening and those opposite know it. Those opposite talk about committees. It is a case of when in doubt, form a committee. That is what this government is doing. What is it going to do for the sugar industry? Nothing! It will just talk in circles. The government should do something positive for a change. What about the Worldwide Fund for Nature? It is trying to crucify the sugar industry. How many people on the government side of the House have said anything against that organisation? They have not said anything about the Worldwide Fund for Nature, which is trying to crucify the sugar industry. Those opposite know that.

The government should look at implementing a system of strategy regions. They have successfully reinvigorated devastated regions throughout Australia. Those strategy regions are in fact managed by the community. It would be far better to have one of those than this committee. As an example, the south-west strategy used in the Charleville area covered 323,000 square kilometres and represented a long-term strategy to reinvigorate the region, provide alternative industries, improve efficiency in existing industries, allow for farm build-up with improved productivity and provide re-establishment assistance for those who leave the land. The sugar industry needs a long-term strategy, as has been mentioned tonight, but the government has not put up one plan. This is one way it can be done.

The sugar industry needs a long-term, viable strategy—some sort of a millennium vision. Tomorrow's farmers need the opportunity to expand. They need clear choice for the future. Various schemes are available through QRAA, as we all know, and there are some federal schemes. However, there is a need for an official body that pulls these things together and develops strategic plans that suit the sugar regions in Queensland. These will vary according to various factors—high rainfall, low rainfall and other products that can be grown in those regions. Low interest loans can be better targeted, whether it be for build-up, improved water reticulation to drought-prone areas or opportunities to form cooperatives to reduce costs. This is part of the plan that can be implemented if we approach the problems in a strategic way, not by forming a Labor Party committee.

Assistance could also be provided for small business to renew the area and make it viable and therefore provide the necessary service for that community. The community must be viable. The community needs to have structures in place to be able to perform. A strategy region could help farmers in the community to go from a bleak situation to a viable position, enabling them to ride the international wave. Other areas around Australia have strategy regions, and there are a number of them. Even though the programs implemented by the federal government have changed—in the past it was the Rural Partnership Program and it is now the Agriculture Advancing Australia Program, or AAAP—these strategy regions are developed and driven by community people. It is not government that drives them, and that is the problem. If we try to work them from a government point of view, they just will not work in the long term, and they have not worked that way.

These strategies actually work. There are a number of them around Australia. The program is designed to encourage increased profitability and self-reliance in a competitive economic environment,

responsiveness to changing market demands for goods, clever management of rural resources and more robust and equitable and prosperous rural communities. I mentioned the south-west strategy earlier. There is also the Sunraysia strategy in Victoria and New South Wales centred on Mildura. Irrigated vines and citrus are the main crops, with avocados, asparagus, olives and almonds reflecting a willingness to diversify. This funding supports business planning and interest rate subsidies to assist producers—

Time expired.
