



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR WHITSUNDAY

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DRUGS MISUSE AMENDMENT BILL

Ms JARRATT (Whitsunday—ALP) (3.24 p.m.): It is with great pleasure that I rise to support the Drugs Misuse Amendment Bill 2002. Indeed, I am positively excited by the prospects made possible for my electorate and the whole of Queensland through the passage of this bill. I have not often had an opportunity to participate in an action that has the potential to reinvigorate an entire industry, but I believe that this amendment bill will quite likely lay the foundation for just such a revolution.

I cannot help but note a certain irony attached to the presentation of a bill that seeks to pave the way for the introduction of a hemp industry in this state. I am reminded of the saying that the more things change the more they stay the same. Evidence exists to suggest that hemp was one of the first crops ever to be cultivated. No doubt this was largely because it was easy to grow, required little water, was very hardy and could be used for a wide variety of purposes, including such things as providing fibre for rope and clothing and as a food source—particularly as an animal food. In fact, hemp has probably been around since people kept chooks in their cave backyards.

One of the consequences of improved standards of living and increased leisure time at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries was the tendency for people to look to so-called recreational drugs like alcohol, cocaine, tobacco and cannabis to complement their lifestyle. Interestingly, some of these drugs have consequently been outlawed while others remain both legal and widely used. The rights and wrongs of that situation could be the subject of debate at another time and place, but I do note that cannabis sativa, which includes varieties grown predominantly for fibre, was outlawed throughout much of the Western World at various times during the last century. Since being declared a dangerous drug in Queensland it has been an offence to cultivate, use or traffic the drug in any form.

In the early 1990s the Queensland government took what I suppose can be described as the fairly courageous step of initiating discussions with industry bodies about the potential of investigating research and development of industrial hemp as a possible commercial commodity. The Industrial Hemp Advisory Committee, comprising representatives from government, departments and industry, was established to investigate these possibilities. As a consequence of this action, in 1998 the Drugs Misuse Act was amended to allow for controlled field trials and plant breeding research of low drug content cannabis sativa to occur over a three-year period. This period was extended by a further 12 months and is set to expire in December this year.

Suffice to say that the results of research undertaken in Queensland and across Australia over the past few years have indicated an enormous potential for both the growth and manufacture of products from industrial hemp. One of the prime motivating factors for the development of industrial hemp as a crop is that it can be used to produce a wide variety of products from paper and clothing to structural building materials and geotextiles. Couple this with the fact that it is an ecologically sustainable, renewable and recyclable resource and its potential expands exponentially. The global market for hemp products appears to be almost insatiable. Take, for instance, the fact that the European market has stipulated to its members that 95 per cent of each car produced must be recyclable by the year 2015. Because hemp is a source product for many internal car components, we begin to realise the enormous potential of this product.

There are many reasons why I believe that industrial hemp has a great future in Queensland. Its versatility and diversity as an agricultural crop make it well suited in areas that are currently crying out for diversification. The sugar industry, for example, stands at a crossroads. And while I am not suggesting that hemp will ever replace sugarcane as a crop of choice, it will provide a viable option for those canefarmers who either exit the industry or want to diversify. Hemp also appears well suited to complement horticultural production in places like Bowen where inconsistent prices and pests and disease regularly force marginal operations to the wall. The wonderful thing about hemp as a crop is that it is drought resistant, has relatively few threats from pests and disease and can actually improve soil condition and repress soil-borne diseases. I am very excited at the prospect of hemp being grown on a rotational basis with crops such as tomatoes, as there appear to be many symbiotic factors apparent in the relationship. Importantly, industrial hemp has been shown to have gross margins comparable to other summer crops but with lower outlay and lower risk factors.

Queensland has several advantages over other states of Australia when it comes to growing industrial hemp as a stand-alone crop. Firstly, we have the potential to grow two crops per season in our warmer climate, compared to the single crop available to southern states and other countries with temperate climates. It also seems likely that varieties of industrial hemp suitable for tropical and subtropical climates may be more vigorous than varieties suited to temperate regions. But herein lies the immediate problem for industry development. We do not yet have sufficient stocks of suitable seed available to get under way.

That is why this legislation is particularly important. It establishes three licence categories that are appropriate to the level of research and development still needed to develop suitable plant varieties and seed stocks. The first licence category relates to plant breeding and will provide for plant breeders to conduct research on cannabis sativa plants and seeds with a THC concentration of greater than three per cent. While cannabis plants with a THC level of three per cent would still be considered in the category of a dangerous drug, it is necessary to allow licensed breeders access to such seeds and plants for the purpose of plant characteristic selection. The bill provides appropriate checks and balances to ensure that plants with higher THC concentrations are not used for purposes other than those pertaining to plant selection and breeding.

A second plant breeding licence category will provide for plant breeders to conduct research on cannabis plants and seeds with a THC concentration of less than three per cent. Again, there is sufficient flexibility in this category to allow meaningful research to be undertaken. I understand that it may be some three to seven years before sufficient stocks of viable seed will be available for large-scale cropping, particularly in tropical and subtropical areas. This bill ensures that important research in the field of plant breeding, including that using DNA marker assisted techniques, can continue to occur.

The other category created through this bill will provide for the field production of industrial hemp. Growers will be required to use seed that has been certified as having THC concentration of not greater than one half of one per cent, with a tolerance level of up to one per cent.

As I mentioned at the outset, I am positively excited by the future potential of an industrial hemp industry in this state. I wish to thank the Attorney-General for bringing this bill to the House. I also pay tribute to the Minister for Primary Industries and his staff and department, who I know have played a major role in the development of this amendment bill. I am happy to support the bill and I commend it to the House.