



Speech by

## Miss FIONA SIMPSON

MEMBER FOR MAROOCHYDORE

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### SUGAR INDUSTRY AMENDMENT BILL

**Miss SIMPSON** (Maroochydore—NPA) (8.40 p.m.): I rise to support the Sugar Industry Amendment Bill, which my colleague the member for Hinchinbrook has so ably brought before the parliament. My family has been involved with the sugar industry for nearly 30 years, but tragically the sugar industry on the Sunshine Coast, which has been going for more than 100 years, is about to cease to exist. This has been a way of life for hundreds of people—not only for those directly involved on farm but for more people off farm who have relied on the sugar industry on the Sunshine Coast for their livelihoods. With the multiplier effect, it has been worth about \$80 million a year to the Sunshine Coast, and I think many people do not realise just what a significant impact it will have, seeing as it looks as though this is the first of the sugar growing areas that is going to fail.

As I said, this bill was brought into the parliament by my colleague the member for Hinchinbrook, who was well aware of the sorts of difficulties that the Moreton cane growing area on the Sunshine Coast was facing and similar issues that were reflected in other cane growing areas of Queensland. This bill is about equity. It is about fairness. It is about a future for the sugar industry. There are some very important principles which the shadow minister has put into this bill and about which he has consulted quite thoroughly and widely. One such issue has been about addressing some of the power imbalances that currently exist in the industry. For example, in the Moreton cane growing area, a mill could essentially be owned by a company that closes down and that mill would have nowhere else to take its crop—unless it wanted to pay a price to go to another region, which would not be profitable.

The Moreton cane growing area is a single mill area. I will explain to the House what that means. It means that we do not have the advantages of competition or alternative mills to which we can take our crops. We are very reliant, very dependent upon that mill continuing to exist. Only a small portion of the total crop from the Sunshine Coast—or the Moreton cane growing area, as it is known—is able to be profitably taken to other areas. That is one of the options currently being looked at by canegrowers on the Sunshine Coast but, as I understand it, there are only potentially about 200,000 tonnes out of the 500,000- to 600,000-tonne crop that are able to go to alternative mills. We are essentially a single mill area.

That is why in previous years I have argued about the impact of decisions—particularly government decisions—to put roads through the middle of cane fields. I have listened to people who have said that it will have no impact. As one of the areas most affected by government resumptions, we have now reached a critical stage in that we are below what the mill believed was a viable amount of land needed to continue cropping cane in the current world market.

It is on the public record now that canegrowers tried to seek out alternative products from sugar cane, and I believe they tried their best in that regard. That is an essential part of the bill that we see before the House. It seeks to address the imbalance where a mill can just close down. It seeks to address the fact that there needs to be some time period in which they have to keep operating in order to enable appropriate and viable alternatives to be put in place for that crop.

As the law currently stands, there could be hundreds of tonnes of cane in the ground which people have spent thousands of dollars fertilising, and it may reach the point where they have nowhere

to have that processed. That is not equitable and it is not fair. That situation needs to be addressed. Sugar cane is an extremely expensive crop to cart over long distances. It is different in that regard from a number of other crops.

This bill is also about addressing the future need for the sugar industry to have products other than sugar. It is about having the mechanisms to encourage products other than just sugar. As we see with the world price of sugar, our competitors are able to produce sugar in incredible quantities—and they are able to produce it for a market which has been corrupted. To ensure the future of this industry we need alternative products. There are some very interesting products. Ethanol is one product, but there are a number of other products such as those in the bioplastics industry.

There are also environmental concerns. There is talk about the Moreton cane growing area in particular. I think a lot of people on the Sunshine Coast are only now realising how valuable open green space is. We already have a biofactory through the sugar industry—or the cane industry, as I should call it—that has been able to provide a relatively low impact crop upon the river plains of the Sunshine Coast. It is low impact when we consider that it is a crop that can have four returns. It is effective in that it is a yearly harvest, and compared to some other alternatives it has far less of an impact.

Yet the real beauty of the Sunshine Coast—aside from the money that has come from that crop historically—has been those green cane fields. That is our concern. Not only do we want the industry to have some time in order to restructure and be able to produce alternative products; we also want to maintain an effective and environmentally appropriate agricultural industry upon our beautiful river flats on the Sunshine Coast. To do nothing and to see it carved up and sold off, as is currently happening, is a tragedy.

This bill was introduced in April with the intention of addressing some of the imbalances. Tragically, it has taken a long time for this bill to come before the parliament, but it is important for the future of the cane industry in Queensland that the principles of this bill are adopted and that they are understood by the members of this House. This is an industry that affects hundreds of people not only on farm but also off farm. It is about the rural and regional towns throughout Queensland. It is about the infrastructure of many of our towns throughout Queensland. To do nothing is not an option.

There are people who are desperate to put in place the necessary changes to ensure that this industry is effective in the future, but it requires appropriate and supporting legislation in this case to enable them to do that. It also requires a government to have its eyes on an industry which has not just traditionally been understood to be a Queensland industry but one which needs to see that it does have a future in Queensland. It is not smart to see regions close down. It is not smart to see a lack of focus in providing support for alternatives. It is not smart to have green space that is weeds and not a viable alternative industry.

I know that on the Sunshine Coast and in many other parts of Queensland we want to see viable industries that have the focus of government, that have its understanding about the diversity of the stakeholder groups within this industry and that have the ability to address some imbalances that exist in the current legislation. Those imbalances can mean that a mill can be closed down and there is no power in the hands of people who have spent thousands and thousands of dollars putting a crop in the ground. That is wrong, that needs to be changed, and that is what this legislation deals with—as well as future issues enabling alternative products to be produced by this industry.

I commend this bill to the House and I commend my colleague the member for Hinchinbrook, the shadow primary industries minister, for his diligence in taking this forward and for listening to the views of the many stakeholder groups in Queensland. He understands that this is a vital industry which needs the assistance and focus of government in order to have an effective future.