



Speech by

Miss FIONA SIMPSON

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SUGAR INDUSTRY AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL [No. 2]

Miss SIMPSON (Maroochydore—NPA) (5.43 p.m.): In rising to speak against the Sugar Industry and Other Legislation Amendment Bill (No. 2), I want to note that the member for Greenslopes, as a city member who has no sugar industry in his electorate, thought that he knew better than those who have criticised this bill because there is sugar on the shelves in his local stores.

Ms Nolan interjected.

Miss SIMPSON: I would suggest that he should have talked to some of the industry representatives throughout this state who have been extremely critical of aspects of this bill because it has been brought into this parliament without consultation with industry and the broad interests of industry. This involves the livelihoods of people who will simply go broke—some quietly and many not so quietly—because of the devastating impact of the challenges that the industry is facing, challenges which are being added to by the way that this government has gone about this.

This sugar bill is an arsenic-laced cake which the whole industry is being told to eat without complaint because, according to the state government, it is good for it. The state government's response has been paternalistic and condescending to the vast interests of the sugar industry and the hundreds and thousands of people who rely on it—whether they are on farms or in associated industries or live in the towns which supply those industries and depend upon them for their local economy. There is more than a touch of intellectual arrogance and snobbery from state government members who use the words 'change management' and 'only way forward' as a blanket defence against some well-argued criticisms of key portions of this bill.

My National Party colleagues in their speeches this afternoon have raised some of the intricacies of the impacts of aspects of this bill, particularly the lack of consultation with industry and lack of consultation with the federal government. For example, Ian Ballantyne, the general manager of Canegrowers, wanted the government to recognise that growers' concerns about aspects of the bill to partially deregulate were worthy of consideration and that some modification of the proposed legislation was necessary to satisfy the best interests of the industry and the community. He said—

It is not good enough for the Premier to simply insist that the federal government and the industry should fall in line with the state's position. It is disappointing that Mr Beattie feels that it is necessary to come down hard on anyone who dares question the state government's special insight into what is needed to save the sugar industry.

The article goes on to state—

Fundamental to cane growers' concerns was the fact that cash-strapped growers, both individually and collectively, were potentially placed at an unfair disadvantage to major sugar millers which had geographic and economic dominance. Third-party intervention should not be the first option, but without it as a safety net the mills would endure unmitigated leverage. Ultimate recourse to mandatory arbitration was needed to restore balance to the situation.

I also remind Premier Beattie of his statement published in the *Australian* on 1 May 2003 where he said—

If you—

that is, the federal government—

want us to pull out and walk away from this legislation, say so publicly and we will be happy to do it.

Well, he has not. The government has ridden roughshod over the industry and ignored some very valid concerns. Just the interjections from members before and the catcalls confirm to me that they have this

arrogant attitude that any criticism is somehow a denial of the fact that industry has to change. We all recognise the huge challenges that an industry as diverse as this and with a geographic diversity throughout this state has to face. We have to support appropriate changes and people who have been through drought, flood and those facing urban encroachment, as has happened in my area where one of the largest incursions upon cane growing land has in fact been by government.

Mrs Carryn Sullivan interjected.

Miss SIMPSON: I want to address the Sunshine Coast situation which the member opposite is quite ignorant of. Some 10,000 hectares of sugar cane growing land is about to be lost because of the situation that has arisen in a single mill growing area and the fact that the mill has indicated that it will cease operations. It has formally notified the government. This legislation before the House is in no way a reprieve for that particular situation. But I do want to raise this issue in this parliament because I believe that the state government has been more than willing to listen to the interests of the millers perhaps disproportionately to the interests of cane growers. While we recognise that there has to be good cooperation between millers, growers and all the other associated parts of the sugar cane industry, the very fact that legislation such as this strips away mandatory collective bargaining demonstrates that this government has no idea about the importance of collective bargaining in an industry such as this.

The huge infrastructure investment that goes into an industry is the reason for the regulatory framework. For members of the Labor Party to argue that to strip away some of this regulation to shift the balance of power to millers is good is a bit too hard to swallow for those who know what it has been like to live and operate in an area with a single mill. For the benefit of members whose information about sugar comes from reading ingredient labels on products in their local stores, I point out that when we have a single mill area, a monopoly or a de facto monopoly in areas—

Ms Nolan: Do you think Mike Horan shouldn't have spoken on this bill. There's no sugar up there.

Miss SIMPSON: There are farmers and shopkeepers in my electorate and other electorates on the Sunshine Coast, which is represented by the broad political spectrum, who are in a single mill area and who do not have the alternative of taking crops to another mill. It is simply not cost-effective to do that. With urban encroachment and encroachment by government through roads and other major resumptions on the Sunshine Coast the industry has now reached the point at which the overseas owner has said it will pack up shop and sell off hundreds of millions of dollars of cane land and leave in the lurch an industry with hundreds of employees.

Mr Malone: Isn't that very similar to what CSR did in New South Wales?

Miss SIMPSON: I thank the honourable member. The reality is that these people do not have alternatives.

Mr Reeves: Does your family own a sugar cane farm?

Miss SIMPSON: I heard a member quipping that my family also has sugar interests. They do not rely upon sugar interests. I am fighting for this because there are hundreds of people who do rely upon sugar interests and who do not have alternatives. From an environmental point of view, the mill is a huge landowner and is looking at flogging off some of its land. But what are the alternatives for those left struggling to make ends meet, particularly those on flood plains that do not have a lot of alternative uses? They will be stuck with agricultural land where there are very little, if any, alternative agricultural crops that can be grown viably.

Mrs Carryn Sullivan: They've wrecked the land.

Miss SIMPSON: The member claims that they have wrecked the land. For the information of the member, I point out that there are some fine farmers. The problem we have is that some arrogant members think they have the superiority to dictate what they think is good for a complex industry, which had the right to be consulted. They have a right to understanding from government, rather than to have this imposed on them.

Mr Malone: You can't destroy a piece of land more than by putting a house upon it.

Miss SIMPSON: The member is right. We are talking about flood plains on the Sunshine Coast, the green cane fields which are part of the beauty of the Sunshine Coast—flood plains where I do not want to see houses or industry located because of the potential adverse impacts. These farmers do not have any alternatives other than sugar. I am most disappointed that there seems to be so many Labor members who have the attitude of saying that that is just tough luck. For their information, I point out that many people, not just canefarmers, are affected. Government members have a hatred of people on the land. Many people other than canefarmers rely upon this industry on the Sunshine Coast, which Labor members seem quite happy to see destroyed.

Nambour, which is not in my electorate, is an old regional centre of the Sunshine Coast and there are still many businesses that depend upon industries associated with sugar. The mill employees, the blue-collar workers, who I have talked to are quite rightly distressed because they know their options. They will not be placated by the government's little training package as it is trotted out as the great big answer to the Sunshine Coast sugar cane industry crisis. That is a complete joke. We want to see real assistance from the state government in bringing its influence to bear to be able to keep this mill going for another season beyond this. We want to at least have the best long-term options for the whole of the Sunshine Coast and the whole of that industry. There are hundreds of workers off farm and on farm—members opposite seem to have a hatred of them—who rely on this industry. Taken at its value two years ago, it is an \$80 million industry. It injects significant funds into the local economy. The closure of that mill will have a devastating impact on that local economy. That is why the government needs to use its influence with the millers rather than taking a hands-free approach and saying, 'It's the canefarmers own fault,' which is what has been conveyed to me. The government needs to use its influence to keep the mill open beyond the next season so that the best long-term options can be investigated and put in place.

As has been mentioned in the debate previously, one of the options has involved the ethanol industry. In this climate of ongoing uncertainty and crisis, people have been at the minute before midnight in terms of whether they can go forward or afford to commit to the future. This legislation, which removes the collective bargaining provisions, clearly signals that the government believes that somehow there is a level playing field between cane growers and millers. For the information of the members who were shouting, catcalling and going on about the sugar industry on the Sunshine Coast, I point out that there is not a level playing field when it comes to bargaining between some of these powers, particularly in monopoly areas or at the fringes of a multi-mill area, where people do not have the option of taking cane to another mill.

This bill is not the answer. It is of concern to me that it serves only to reinforce the attitude of this government. It reinforces that there seems to be a misunderstanding and hatred of the industry on the part of the government. Members opposite seem to think that all of these people are conservative voters. I have news for them: there are a lot of blue-collar workers and farmers whose traditional history has in no way been conservative. I am amazed when I hear condescending comments in the corridors of this place about cane cockies and rich farmers. It is about time they woke up to the fact that many people in this state living on farms or working in farm jobs or in associated industries are in dire economic straits. I am disappointed that this seems to be the attitude that is driving this government's desire to break down some of the regulations that have been able to provide at least some collective bargaining power, which I thought unionists were supposed to support. I am very disappointed that this seems to be driven by their philosophical hatred of some of these people. They show a lack of will to consult people. There are jobs today that will not exist in 12 months time. I am very concerned for the Sunshine Coast, knowing that we have 10,000 hectares of land—

Government members interjected.

Miss SIMPSON: I note for the record that I have heard some calls from the other side of the chamber that show they do not respect the fact that there are hundreds of families in the Moreton canegrowing area of the Sunshine Coast that will find themselves in debt and without other options to use their land or their equipment if they are contractors. Suppliers in the local communities have been putting off workers in anticipation of what lies ahead.

Mr Malone: All of those jobs down the drain.

Miss SIMPSON: All of those jobs are down the drain. Members opposite do not seem to care. I believe the best long-term option is for the government to provide its influence and support for the mill to be able to crush for an additional season so that the best long-term options for everyone are open to be implemented. Let it be put on the record—

An incident having occurred in the public gallery—

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms Jarratt): Order! Please remove those people from the gallery.

A further incident having occurred in the gallery—

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! Please clear the entire gallery.

Miss SIMPSON: In closing, a do-nothing option is not good enough for the future of the whole Sunshine Coast. That is why it is about time that, as I have said already, we saw some real commitment and regard to those hundreds of jobs and people who are relying upon this industry and who are looking for alternatives in the way forward. I reiterate the comments of my colleagues that this legislation does not offer hope for the wider industry. On the Sunshine Coast, the Moreton cane growing area has been in a dire situation because of the impacts that it is feeling.

Government members interjected.

Miss SIMPSON: I am most disappointed that some of the members opposite, with their screaming, interjections and comments, seem to have the attitude of 'Tough luck if this is what has happened'. Some of us are going to keep on fighting for these people, because I have known some of them since I was a child and I also know some of the younger people who have come into the jobs that are associated with this industry.

I care about the future of the Sunshine Coast and these hundreds of people, their families and their jobs. They simply do not have all the options and opportunities that some of the members opposite who scream and interject have laid out at their feet. I think that it is time that we started standing up for the real battlers in this state—those who are in a situation of disadvantage when the government refuses to consult and listen to them and instead rides roughshod over them because of its so-called intellectual superiority in the way in which it likes to put forward its opinion without consideration of the diverse interests of people who have to live with its long-term decisions.