



Speech by

Hon. PETER BEATTIE

MEMBER FOR BRISBANE CENTRAL

Hansard 27 April 2004

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Council of Australian Governments

Hon. P. D. BEATTIE (Brisbane Central—ALP) (Premier and Minister for Trade) (9.37 a.m.): I welcome the Prime Minister's decision to hold the next meeting of the Council of Australian Governments on 25 June. As I told the House last Thursday in response to a question from the member for Southport, I was concerned about rumours propagated by Mr Howard's own ministers that he would not face a COAG meeting before the election. I said that he needed to sign off on the invitations to COAG to show that he is not being politically wimpish because COAG has the capacity to advance some very important issues for the people of this country.

On Friday night my office received a fax from Mr Howard proposing COAG be held on 25 June, and I thank the Prime Minister for the courtesy of responding to my concerns. While I believe COAG needs to be reformed to make it more effective and relevant to Australians, it has recently made progress on crucial issues including counterterrorism. One element which is particularly complex but important is the handling of ammonium nitrate. The vast majority of Australians who buy ammonium nitrate use it responsibly in farming or mining, so we have to apply commonsense. But public safety must always be the No. 1 concern.

Through a COAG process, Queensland has been integral to the development of proposed national measures for dealing with ammonium nitrate. Last year we were the lead state for a hazardous materials review focused on ammonium nitrate. In Queensland safe storage of ammonium nitrate is already regulated under the Dangerous Goods Safety Management Act 2001. Manufacturing facilities are subject to occupational health and safety rules, and requirements such as boundary security and access control. Through the process kicked off by COAG, we now have a proposed national regime for regulating ammonium nitrate through a permit and licensing system.

Queensland broadly supports the proposal. In fact, I think it needs to be urgently implemented, preferably ahead of the next COAG meeting. I do not believe at this stage that a total ban on ammonium nitrate is needed. It would certainly cause inconvenience for industry and add to production costs for some Queensland farmers.

For simplicity and efficacy, Queensland believes ammonium nitrate should be regulated in a similar fashion, whether it is sold as fertiliser or explosives. A smart regulatory regime should also have an eye on the potential for other high nitrate fertilisers or other hazardous substances to emerge as threats in the future.

The last thing we want is people with an evil intent crossing our state and territory borders to exploit weaker controls. So while states and territories regulate hazardous materials, it really is up to the federal government to make sure systems are uniform across-the-board.

This is clearly a case where COAG has a role, but hopefully it can be sorted out before 25 June. A meeting of officers is scheduled for this week. Let's hope they can progress this matter then.