



Speech by

## Robert Messenger

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Hansard Friday, 21 April 2006

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### RACING AMENDMENT BILL

**Mr MESSENGER** (Burnett—NPA) (3.58 pm): I rise to contribute to the debate on the Racing Amendment Bill 2006. I do so with mixed emotions. I am happy to have the opportunity to speak about racing, because it is an important and significant industry in Bundaberg and the Burnett—indeed, in Queensland and Australia. However, it is also sad to reflect on the unnecessary damage and the heartache inflicted on the Queensland racing industry by this Labor government.

Racing is a quintessential Australian cultural experience. I remember I recently saw on television one of Pro Hart's paintings of those famous bush racing scenes, and I remember some of the most wonderful and happy times—some of the best social events that I have ever attended. I have to confess that I have been lucky, or unlucky enough, to own a share in a couple of racehorses. I have owned them long enough to know that for most people the moment you stop feeding them is the moment that you start making some money. On reflection, what a seductive and joyful way to lose money. That one win that you get in a two-horse race at Holbrook at six to four odds still stays with me to this very day, and the longevity of that memory at least gives me value for money.

**Mr Hoolihan:** You don't do much punting!

**Mr MESSENGER:** I have stopped punting. I have been lucky enough to attend hundreds of bush meetings in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland and I understand implicitly just how important racing is to regional Australia. The latest figures that have been provided to me show that the racing industry employs more than 55,000 Queenslanders and is worth around \$1.5 billion to the state's economy. It is not just the monetary value that we should take into account when we consider racing. We have to take account of substantial issues such as community spirit and a community's social wellbeing. Some of the best lessons that I have ever learnt in life have been at the racetrack. 'Don't bet more than you can afford to lose.' 'There is no such thing as a sure thing.' 'If the odds are less than four to one, put it on the nose.' 'Never back a horse which is sweating white in the mounting enclosure,' which is another one that was passed on to me.

I have had my office contact Mr Bevan McDuff, who is the manager of the Bundaberg race club. Bevan makes some comments about the local racing industry in the Bundaberg district. There are a number of horses in the district—probably 40 to 50 horses. The loss of meetings has had a significant impact on country jockeys and owners. Mr McDuff has said that owners and jockeys have to travel to get to the races, which is costly, and that prize money just was not worth it. This is backed up by Mount Isa jockey Keith Ballard, who, when interviewed by ABC North West Queensland radio late last year, said that jockeys have to travel a lot further to get as many rides, resulting in their costs increasing and receiving less money in return.

The prize money for Bundaberg racing is around \$4,000 per race. When that is split between first, second, third and fourth placegetters, it is about \$2,600 for first prize. Bundaberg cannot compete with the bigger clubs, especially like Rockhampton, where the prize money is bigger and worth more travelling to. There is a general perception that there are not enough races in Bundaberg and there is a lack of prize money. Bundaberg races have not got enough race meetings. They have been reduced from 19 to eight

races last year. I believe that many years ago the Bundaberg races used to race almost 53 meetings a year. They managed to get in an extra midweek meeting, so it was almost a race per week. Ideally, I know that Bundaberg would love to have one a month. So they are looking at about an extra four races to take it to about 12 races a year. People are leaving the racing industry and people are not buying horses because there is too much uncertainty in the industry. When this bill passes this House on government numbers, I hope that it provides some certainty for the industry.

The cost to upkeep the track is the same at every racecourse, no matter how many races they have to maintain. From 10 am to 2 pm every day there is maintenance of the track. As members can imagine, on most of the tracks that is a very costly exercise. Crowd numbers are much the same as they were when there were 19 races in Bundaberg but it means that the club has to advertise more to let people know when the eight races are on to keep the crowd numbers up. Of course, this is a costly exercise, too. At Bundaberg there were 50 stables on the racetrack plus six private stables, and they were full approximately two to three years ago. Now 18 to 20 of those stables are full.

One of my favourite race meetings is the Mount Perry race meeting. It is not in my electorate; neither is Bundaberg, for that matter, but many of my constituents own horses and many of my constituents visit the races in Bundaberg. Mount Perry races were a highlight of the social calendar in the Bundaberg-Burnett area. They are not only known regionally and within Queensland but also known all around Australia as one of those beautiful country races and iconic country races that people had to attend. The region previously had four race meetings per year, which were then downgraded to two races. The community was quite happy with two races. It was sufficient. However, the community has now lost both its races, and country racing at Mount Perry has been completely wiped out by Queensland Racing under this Labor government.

In October last year it would have been two years since Mount Perry has held a race meeting. Those races, as I explained before, were extremely important to the community. They were also important to the Bundaberg population, which regularly attended races there. The Mount Perry car park was full of buses from Bundaberg. Indeed, there was a landing strip in the middle of the races and people used to fly in. After you kiss goodbye to your money betting on the horses, you could stay around at the end of the day and watch the more rich punters take off in their aircraft. It is quite scenic at Mount Perry. It is beautiful country.

In the minister's summation, I would like him to guarantee that he would urge this new racing body to reintroduce racing at Mount Perry. Mount Perry has always had massive crowds, with around 1,500 to 2,000 people turning up to the meets. It is an astounding number since the total population of Mount Perry two years ago was only around 420. People came from everywhere, as I said, to the race meetings. About 100 people would set up camp for the weekend. Thirteen or fourteen planes would also fly in to the region from areas all around Queensland to be involved in those iconic races at Mount Perry.

The Secretary of the Mount Perry Race Club, Noela Clarey, said that it is an absolute shame that the race meets were closed, as it was a good facility there at the course. She said that wiping out the races created a big hole in the economy and a big hole in the social side of Mount Perry. Noela has asked me to advocate on her behalf and that of the residents and the residents of the Burnett to get their horse racing back, even if it is just one race. They would be happy with just one race per year. They would be extremely grateful.

That is why now the community has banded together. The community of Mount Perry has looked at retaliating against Queensland Racing's move to wipe out its horse race meets by resorting to hosting camel racing. The small community last year got together and put on some camel racing. For me, it does not have the same flavour as horse racing. You can never tell which camel is going to win. It is totally pot luck. I can never judge a camel in a mounting enclosure, whether it is a fast one or a slow one.

**Mr Barton:** You wouldn't want to back an ugly one.

**Mr MESSENGER:** I will take the interjection from the minister. Maybe you back the good-looking camels. I will defer to him because maybe he has had more experience than I.

**Mr Barton:** I have been to the camel races in Mongolia.

**Mr MESSENGER:** I take that interjection, Minister. I am sure he backed a winner—and a very good-looking winner, too. All money raised from the camel race days went towards the kids involved in the Mount Perry sport and recreational club. I think it is a very important point to reflect on. These bush races were not just to line the pockets of the big end of town. Often the funds from these bush races that have been wiped out went to worthwhile charities.

My office recently researched Queensland Racing figures and the figures before me show that alarming trend that we all know and tell a sad tale. They prove that under the management of this government the racing industry has suffered significantly.

In 2000-01 the total prize money was around \$61 million. The figure for prize money in 2003-04 was about \$63 million. The number of meetings held in 2000-01 was 909; in 2003 it was 738. In 2000-01 the

number of clubs was about 137. That was reduced to 117 in 2003-04. The number of jockeys, that is including apprentices and amateurs, was 385 at the beginning of the 21st century and about three years later it was reduced to 284. Trainers similarly started out at around 1,033. They were reduced to 968. The number of owner trainers was 395 which was reduced three years later to 255. The number of starters was around 52,000 and was reduced to around 48,000 in 2003-04. There were about 8,500 horses at the beginning of the century which was reduced to 8,255 in 2003-04. The number of racetracks was 118 in 2000-01 which reduced in 2003-04 to 101. The total number of races significantly dropped from 6,056 down to 4,950.

The racing industry, along with its spirit and culture, is important to the conservative side of politics. That has been proven in part today by the eloquent, insightful and passionate speeches from the shadow minister and the member for Toowoomba South. The conservative speaking list is extensive compared with what is a miserly contribution from this government. I listened carefully to the debate and I look forward to hearing the minister's address in reply.