



Speech by

Robert Messenger

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Hansard Wednesday, 23 May 2007

PRIMARY INDUSTRIES ACTS AMENDMENT AND REPEAL BILL

Mr MESSENGER (Burnett—NPA) (4.46 pm): In rising to contribute to the Primary Industries Acts Amendment and Repeal Bill 2007, I will direct my comments mostly to the provisions of the bill that affect the sugar industry. The coalition values and recognises the contribution that all primary industries make to this state. Aside from its return of around \$11 billion a year to Queensland's economy, primary industries also provide 10 per cent of the state's jobs.

A lot of politicians do not appreciate fully that in order to create wealth for a community or a state, there are really only four ways of doing it: you can either make it, you can mine it, you can grow it, or you can show it. If your business is not involved in one of those activities, then to be brutally honest you are involved in an exercise of taking in each other's washing. As politicians, we must always honour and respect businesses that produce goods, products and services that we can export to the rest of the world, because it is their wealth-creating activities that allow us to import the computers, the cars, the furniture, the whitegoods—the list goes on—and to basically maintain the high standard of living that we enjoy.

Of course, the sugar industry falls into the grow it category. Nationally, the sugar industry injects an estimated \$4.7 billion into the Australian economy each year and sugar exports range between \$900 million and \$1.7 billion in a very good year. The sugar industry has always supported Australia. It employs 35,000 people in our regions. As Senator Boswell says, it has an immeasurable knock-on employment effect. It provides the backbone for many small rural communities.

Locally in the Bundaberg-Burnett region, sugar injects about \$150 million into our economy. About seven or eight years ago it used to inject over \$200 million into our economy—around \$220 million. It has had its lean times, but it has come back. At the same time horticulture injected about \$100 million into our economy. Horticulture production has now jumped over sugar production and now it injects around \$300 million each year.

The sugar industry has been hit with the outbreak of the smut disease, water taxes, low prices, poor weather conditions and high exchange rates. I was talking to my parliamentary colleague the member for Mirani and I did not realise that the Australian exchange rate is around 82 cents. That is good for me if I want to go overseas on my honeymoon, but it is not so great for our—

Mr Hayward: You represent a rural electorate. You should know that, surely.

Mr MESSENGER: I should. I thought it was around the high 70s. I did not appreciate that it has gone above the 80s.

In the Isis and Childers area, Joe Russo, chairman of the Isis Canegrowers, and Gavin Peterson, who is from the Isis mill, are providing the industry with excellent leadership. If the minister wants to help the sugar industry in the Childers and Isis area, apart from having a quiet word to the Premier about making sure that we do not have forced amalgamations, he can encourage the state government to make available for cane growing state forest plantation land north of Childers, formerly lot 779.

As we have already heard in the chamber today, the smut disease is one of the biggest threats to the cane industry and sugar production. Lot 779 is ideal for sugar production. It is surrounded by sugar fields. It has the water infrastructure and the sugarcane railway line. It is in a perfect position. As the crow flies, it is probably only about five or 10 minutes from the Isis mill. It is a very short distance to travel. By opening up this lot to sugar production, the government would achieve a very practical and positive outcome for the Isis sugar growers. Smut is around in the Childers district, and they have taken the hard decisions and planted smut-resistant sugar plants. However, the great fear remains that production and throughput at the Isis mill will fall. We really have to make sure that that does not happen.

Recently, Bundaberg Canegrowers farewelled chairman Alwyn Heidke and vice chairman Gavan McLennan, who retired from the Bundaberg Canegrowers board on 30 April. I wish them the very best. Through times of great hardship, they provided sterling leadership in an industry that is vital to our area. Alwyn has served Bundaberg growers on many committees and has held representative positions since 1977. He has been a member of the board for 30 years and was district chairman for the past three years. Gavan has served on the board since 1985 and has been vice chairman for the past three years.

The new executive board commenced on 1 May. The chairman is Allan Dingle, Tony Castro is senior deputy chairman, Jay Hubert is deputy chairman, and Selwyn Cronin, Kelvin Griffin, Lloyd Poulsen and Joe Zunker are directors. I wish those gentlemen all the very best.

Other members have spoken about the need for ethanol. An ethanol industry would give the sugar industry a huge boost, especially in my district. Therefore, I am disappointed that Queensland will not become the first state to mandate the use of ethanol in petrol. A major benefactor in mandating ethanol is, of course, our hardworking underpaid struggling canefarmers. Mandating ethanol would mean a better, brighter and financially secure future for our farmers and their families, as well as all the workers associated with cane farms. It is very disappointing that New South Wales is going to be the first state to mandate ethanol, particularly for the Bundaberg/Burnett region which needs ethanol to develop the cane growing industry. If it is good enough for New South Wales, it should be good enough for Queensland.

Ethanol in Queensland has not had the chance to go ahead due, once again, to this government's inaction and ability to talk up an issue but really do nothing about it. We have plenty of government web sites, fancy coloured buses and glossy brochures saying how good ethanol is, but there is nothing in the way of action. The Premier and his government have had years to introduce ethanol into Queensland, but they have done nothing. In fact, the Premier has voted against it twice in this parliament. It is obvious that the Premier is against ethanol. He wants to give the impression that he is doing the right thing, but all he is doing is giving hollow promises. Through the minister and the deputy chair, I call on the Premier and his government to give ethanol a boost in Queensland and mandate it.

I turn to primary industries resourcing which this bill deals with. I make the observation, as other conservative members have, that we need strong primary industries staffing levels with appropriately trained people. Parliamentary Library research shows that there has been a reduction of two per cent in permanent workers, 11.7 per cent in temporary workers and 10 per cent in casual workers from 2005 to 2006.

Amendments to the Sugar Industry Act 1999 will implement the first stage phase of the phase-out of the Sugar Industry Commissioner, with the first stage, removing the role of the commissioner, to be completed in three years time, that is, by June 2010. I note that the responsibilities of the office of the commissioner have been considerably reduced anyway and will continue to be reduced after industry deregulation, which forms part of the sugar industry's reform 2004-05.

In removing the role of the Sugar Industry Commissioner, the bill will also remove the current obligation for Queensland Sugar Ltd to fund the position, which I believe amounts to approximately \$340,000. The requirement is set out in accordance with section 228 of the Sugar Industry Act. I am pleased to see that before proceeding with these changes, there has been considerable consultation with industry stakeholders, including Canegrowers, the Australian CaneFarmers Association, the Australian Sugar Milling Council and the Australian Banana Growers Council and Growcom. I note that they have given their support for both approvals.

In closing, I will briefly talk about the sugar commissioner's job. Late last year, I was approached by Mrs Dianne Bauer who had a dispute with Bundaberg Sugar. The dispute was mediated by the sugar commissioner, Mrs Rowena McNally. I congratulate Mrs McNally, because this was a difficult dispute to mediate. The essential details of the dispute were that Bundaberg Sugar was proposing to construct a railway line on Mrs Bauer's property right across the main access. Mrs Bauer said that while Bundaberg Sugar was proposing to take up just 100 square metres of the property, the railway would have been detrimental to her lifestyle. Therefore, she opposed the company's proposal.

Under the legislation, they were beaten before they began. I spoke with Mrs Bauer before I came into the chamber today. Even though she could not stop the railway going ahead, she would like to

congratulate Mrs McNally, the sugar commissioner. Mrs McNally had done everything possible to accommodate safety aspects. She had visited the Bauer's property and walked over the property and she talked at length with Mrs Bauer. Mrs Bauer said that Mrs McNally was very nice and easy to talk with and that she was very obliging. In closing, I pass on my regards to the Sugar Industry Commissioner, who has done a wonderful job.