



Speech by

Rosa Lee Long

MEMBER FOR TABLELANDS

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PRIMARY INDUSTRIES ACTS AMENDMENT AND REPEAL BILL

Ms LEE LONG (Tablelands—ONP) (4.31 pm): I rise to make a contribution to the Primary Industries Acts Amendment and Repeal Bill 2007. This bill deals with two important crops in my electorate and indeed two crops that are important across large areas of the far north—bananas and sugar cane. The amendments relating to the banana industry deal with the troubled issue of pest and disease control, especially the protection of this multimillion-dollar a year industry from new introduced pests and diseases. No doubt members will recall that this industry was severely devastated in the far north by Cyclone Larry and that it is in fact still overcoming the scars left by that catastrophe. Not many years before that the coastal areas were battered by the ravages of black sigatoka disease and the enormous stress suffered by so many farming families and communities during the battle to overcome that infection. Thankfully, bananas on the Tablelands were spared from that disaster.

Since then though the banana industry has been threatened by the importation of Philippine bananas which would not only swamp the market but bring the risk of yet more pests and disease infestations to this state. Moko, freckle and mosaic are three of the very serious diseases that come to mind which are rampant in the Philippines but which we do not yet have here. The banana industry continues to have huge battles with biosecurity and the WTO to keep them out. We all know that there are approximately 20 new pests and diseases being introduced into Queensland each year. This is largely because of the dismal failure of our governments to protect our shores, as highlighted by the doctrine of acceptable risk. The coalition in Canberra has sold out the biosecurity of this country for the dubious promises made under the guise of free trade. Under that mantra, it is ready to accept too high a level of risk for Queensland farmers, primary producers and the future productivity of this state. To its discredit, the Beattie government is also a staunch supporter of the free trade mantra and therefore of the dangerous policies which flow from it.

The explanatory notes to this bill indicate that the dissolution of the banana industry board is due to a combination of factors, the main ones being that the industry no longer supports the board and that many of its functions are now carried out by the DPI under the Plant Protection Act. In recent years the DPI has been involved in a long and costly campaign to eradicate fire ant incursions, the catastrophic citrus canker outbreak and, more recently, the apparently unstoppable spread of sugarcane smut just to mention a few. When it is suggested that entire industries and entire regions rely on the efforts of a government department for their future viability, we all need to remember that the track record of government is far from reassuring. I am referring specifically to the underlying policy decisions such as the doctrine of acceptable risk and also the abysmal underresourcing of biosecurity efforts. The on-the-ground staff enjoy a good reputation among primary producers, but it is at the policy and resourcing level that failure occurs.

Amendments to the Sugar Industry Act 1999 relate to the phasing out of the Sugar Industry Commissioner. This is also a change flowing from the restructuring of the sugar industry and is the first stage in the process of removing the role of the commissioner which will be completed by June 2010. Among her many duties, the commissioner has been responsible for mediating or arbitrating with regard to new supply contracts. It is those responsibilities that these amendments will remove. QSL, which has been funding this position and which is now fully privatised, will no longer be required to meet that obligation.

The cane industry on the Tablelands and on the far-north Queensland coast is also recovering from the effects of cyclones Larry and Monica, but anyone listening to the current prices in the media will have noticed that the returns are now quoted at under 10c which is not a good sign. The prices are dropping significantly. I have also noted that the Australian Cane Farmers Association does not support the removal of the statutory office. Both these industries—cane and bananas—are major contributors to the electorate of the Tablelands, to other electorates in the far north and Queensland as a whole. It is in the interests of this state to ensure that they are properly protected and supported.