



Speech by

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GENE TECHNOLOGY AMENDMENT BILL

Mr LANGBROEK (Surfers Paradise—Lib) (12.12 pm): It is my pleasure to rise to speak in support of the Gene Technology Amendment Bill 2007. As other speakers have mentioned, it amends the Gene Technology Act 2001 which was introduced in Queensland and across Australia to regulate the use of genetically modified organisms across a range of industries and to protect the health and safety of people and to protect our environment. The bill effects a number of changes to the principal act, the most significant of which vests power in the government to exercise emergency powers to expedite the processes involved in dealing with a GMO, and establishes a new Gene Technology Ethics and Community Consultative Committee. This bill provides the necessary framework to regulate progressive gene technologies and keep pace with industry and international developments in the field.

Gene technology is an area of rapid development which has shown great potential to create a more secure food supply, promote a more sustainable environment and, in some cases, improve our health. Last year I was privileged to be part of a delegation led by the police minister. I note that the member for Indooroopilly, who is in the chamber now, was also a part of the delegation to North Rhine-Westphalia, a province in Germany. People there doing a lot of work on gene technology were keen to tell us that they had in fact been able to develop 18-foot maize but were not able to show us. We were certainly impressed, were we not, member for Indooroopilly, that the ability to develop 18-foot maize had been developed and we looked forward to that coming to this country. I seem to remember it was a very interesting professor who spoke with a very large pointer. We found it quite an interesting demonstration, but we would have liked to have seen the 18-foot maize.

An honourable member interjected.

Mr LANGBROEK: Everything was big in Germany; it certainly was. As my coalition colleagues have already mentioned, we witnessed the utility of gene products firsthand in Queensland during the recent outbreak of equine influenza. While significant measures were taken to contain the virus by quarantining and regulating the traffic of horses, another vital measure was the provision of a vaccine to stem the spread of the damaging virus. This vaccine prevented the disease from spreading further and was developed by the use of gene technology. As the member for Cairns mentioned, the mirror Commonwealth legislation allowed the vaccine to become available to the industry up to nine months earlier than what it would have been had the emergency powers provision not been exercised under the legislation.

In these circumstances, obviously time is of the essence. This is why it is important that Queensland has provisions in place to ensure that in the event of a pandemic we are in the best position to protect the health and welfare of Queenslanders. In my capacity as shadow health minister, this is certainly something that I am concerned about. International outbreaks of deathly viruses such as SARS and bird flu have threatened our shores and our people. Australia is not immune to these devastating diseases and, as such, we must ensure our governments are ready in the event of an outbreak. Queenslanders should rightly be concerned about the state government's preparedness for such a pandemic. As we saw during flu season last year, the Beattie-Bligh government was unable to stop the spread of the flu as a result of a shortage of flu vaccines and access to public health care. Instead, it resorted to urging Queenslanders to wear face masks and avoid the Ekka, resulting in the Royal National Association losing tens of millions of

dollars as a result of the government's failure to properly plan for flu season. While this bill may not inspire the Bligh government to pick up its act when it comes to providing adequate care during health crises, what it will do is ensure that the right legislative provisions are in place to make its job easier just in case. Gene technology provides great hope when it comes to fighting fatal pandemics like bird flu. This legislation will ensure that Queenslanders will be able to access GMO treatments that may be available elsewhere in a straightforward and timely manner.

Gene technology has assisted in the development of treatments for diabetes, certain cancers and other diseases such as hepatitis. Biotechnology research provides opportunities to deliver better clinical outcomes to patients and as such it is something that should be supported, and that is why I am pleased to support this bill. As the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation states, gene technology expands Australia's scope to improve our health, create a safer and more secure food supply, generate prosperity and attain a more sustainable environment. Another interesting aspect where gene technology can potentially improve the health of Australians is in genetically modified crops, as I have already mentioned, which is certainly an area which the bill and its principal act govern.

While genetically modified crops are still very much in their infancy in Australia, with trials currently being conducted with GM canola in New South Wales, Victoria and possibly South Australia, advocates of gene technology believe the science could help counter adverse environmental conditions like drought and result in higher yields than traditional crops as well as provide a range of health benefits. For example, internationally GM wheat is said to be increasing dietary fibre which in turn helps reduce cholesterol, a dangerous ingredient in heart disease, and could help tackle diseases such as diabetes and colorectal cancer. I note that continuing research into the trialling and testing of agricultural GM products is something which is also supported by AgForce.

All of these advancements are overseen by the national Office of the Gene Technology Regulator, which was established under similar Commonwealth legislation. The principal act provided for three advisory committees to the office and the minister: the Gene Technology Technical Advisory Committee, the Gene Technology Community Consultative Committee and the Gene Technology Ethics Committee. These committees provide important information and advice to the government on this form of biotechnology. The bill before the House today provides for the union of the community consultative and ethics committees, which provide advice to the regulator and the government on matters of general concern to the community and advice on ethical issues relating to gene technology respectively. Obviously these matters play a significant part in the consideration of the future of gene technology in Australia, particularly given the often controversial nature of the science. It is hoped that merging the committees will provide for greater efficiency and more pleasing outcomes.

The Gene Technology Amendment Bill 2007 also changes the way in which assessment of licences is made—again, changes which aim to provide a more effective and efficient service to GM industries and business. However, it is important that while we continue to move forward in these areas it is integral that the Queensland government, primary industries and the Commonwealth all monitor the use of genetically modified organism products in Queensland to ensure that they do not adversely affect the marketing of Australian products. While the potential benefits of gene technology should be explored and exploited, it should not come at the expense of our farmers who are struggling to sustain primary industries in Queensland.