



Speech by

Shane Knuth

MEMBER FOR CHARTERS TOWERS

Hansard Thursday, 28 August 2008

APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL; APPROPRIATION BILL

Mr KNUTH (Charters Towers—NPA) (4.31 pm): In speaking to the Appropriation Bill today, I would like to bring to the attention of the House an issue that I have raised time and time again—and that is plagues of flying foxes living and roosting amongst residents year in, year out.

In the estimates proceedings it was stated by Dr Glanville that it is known that fruit bats carry the Hendra virus. He went on to say that the focus is not so much on finding ways to get rid of flying foxes but finding out more about the mechanisms through which horses contract the Hendra virus from flying foxes and coming up with strategies to minimise the risks to horses through that mechanism.

Obviously he does not live in Charters Towers. Surely a low-risk strategy would be to scare the bats away from areas where the risk of infection is high. In the meantime, people run the risk of contracting a number of viruses carried by the bats. Does it not make sense to eliminate the exposure horses and people have to flying foxes thereby minimising the possibility of contracting the virus? As the shadow minister stated in the estimates hearing, farmers know that you can deter flying foxes from establishing roosts through limited militation against the scout flying foxes and with very little damage to the bulk of the colony. Any inquiry into the Hendra virus and its link to flying foxes should be focusing on what we are going to do about the bats that live, roost and breed amongst local communities and farms. Scientists know the virus is passed from bats to horses to humans. It is alarming that a young vet died as a result of the Hendra Virus. This virus was contracted from an infected horse, which was believed to be infected by eating the waste products of flying foxes. In every case of the deadly Hendra virus, the flying fox has been the common denominator.

For more than seven years now the bats have been flapping around, living and roosting around people's homes, dropping their excreta all over backyards, children's toys and clean washing. It is time that the government decided to put the people first, particularly following the devastation of the recent death from Hendra virus. Racing clubs are in fear that flying fox colonies in and around the town could spark an outbreak of the disease.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr English): Order! I have given the member some leeway, but we are discussing the expenditure of the departments, not this policy issue. Please come back to the expenditure.

Mr KNUTH: It is about the expenditure and I go on in my speech to outline how we can solve this problem. Research conducted since the first identified case of the Hendra virus has indicated that flying foxes are a natural host of the Hendra virus. I have called for the government to provide funds through the Blueprint for the Bush for the council to employ two EPA or environmental officers to be on call all day every day, if necessary, to do everything in their power to disturb, annoy and harass these bats until they get the message that these areas are not welcome places for flying foxes. We have asked for the colonies of flying foxes to be removed from people's homes and yet the best this government has to offer is to punish law-abiding citizens who try to protect their families by imposing fines of up to \$75,000 for disturbing the colonies.

A warning on the government's own web site states that members of the general public should not handle flying foxes, but residents of Charters Towers and horse trainers run the risk of having bat faeces,

urine and other infected waste dropped on their families and their pets. They run the risk of contracting a number of viruses, including the deadly Hendra virus. There is such little information and research done on the diseases flying foxes spread and yet the only advice the government can offer to residents is to stay clear of them. That is pretty hard to do when they are continually living and roosting in your principal place of residence.

We are asking that the government provide funds through the Blueprint for the Bush for the council to employ two EPA officers. We want the ministers for the environment, health and primary industries to take a strong stance and to acknowledge that the days of protecting flying foxes are over. Not only are residents putting up with the ticks, filth, stench and parasites caused by the flying foxes, but it has now been proved that the placenta of the flying fox in 70 per cent of cases has the potential to carry the Hendra virus. All it needs is a child with a cut foot to stand on a bat placenta and that child could run the risk of contracting the Hendra or lyssavirus. We are calling on the state government to acknowledge that the bats carry a lethal virus and put measures such as those that I have mentioned in place that strongly take action on the flying fox colonies roosting amongst residents and horse stables.