



Speech by

Shane Knuth

MEMBER FOR CHARTERS TOWERS

Hansard Tuesday, 28 October 2008

TABLELANDS RESEARCH STATIONS

Mr KNUTH (Charters Towers—LNP) (12.11 pm): I just want to acknowledge the honourable member for Fitzroy. It is great to see you back, Jim, in good health. You have served your electorate well and I have learnt a lot from you and wish you all of the best for the future, Jim.

Honourable members: Hear, hear!

Mr KNUTH: The announcement by this government to sell off the tablelands research stations is appalling, short-sighted and bewildering. Each of these stations is vital and located in separate climate zones for different horticultural and farm management systems. The problems of food security in the Murray-Darling Basin will provide enormous opportunities for the Atherton tablelands and north Queensland. The research centres are essential for the development of new crops and varieties to the tablelands. The LNP has committed to retaining and revitalising the three stations as an essential part of the tablelands centre of excellence.

The recommendations from the report stated that retaining the sites is a viable option and that while option 1 may have been more desirable to this centralising government it certainly was not the only viable option. There is without a doubt a need for each of these stations as they are specifically important for different reasons—Kairi for dairy research, Walkamin for broadacre cropping and pasture development and Southedge for horticultural research and development.

Over the years we have seen DPI reduced to a mere shadow of its former self, and the closure of these centres will only add to the demise of the once-proud department. The closure will also add further pressure to the ability of the agricultural industry to deal with issues of the future. The agriculture and dairy industries are understandably upset. The Kairi station is the only tropical dairy research station in Australia and possibly the world. The decision to not only close the station but also sell the herd will set back the projects and research currently underway. The sale of the dairy herd and the current facility and the land is purely and simply a money grab to pay off the \$65 billion debt this government has created. This sale will be at the expense of hardworking farmers on the tablelands who have been kicked in the guts time and time again.

The LNP supports the introduction of additional extension officers but will not sell off any land. We have grave concerns for the future of the Mareeba Agricultural College. Our concerns are for the fate of the students. Will the emphasis remain on the students and the current curriculum? More than 20,000 people are employed in the agricultural industry in north Queensland, which generates 40 per cent of the state's beef and horticultural production. The industry has the potential to expand, but the minister has taken a backward step through this so-called fresh approach. Instead of grabbing the opportunity created by a looming global food crisis, the minister has effectively shut down the potential to expand and diversify by negating the benefits of the research station.

The Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics predicts that agricultural production in the sugar industry could decline by 17 per cent and the beef industry by 34 per cent by 2050 due to the impact of climate change. The government needs to protect the agricultural industry's ability to adapt to this threat by providing avenues of research—not closing them down—and building the infrastructure

required to take advantage of the climate in the north. Simply, it needs to identify the potential of the area and capitalise on this to ensure not only the security of the industry but also the potential for increased productivity.

Future challenges for the industry combined with the lack of research and development will minimise the contribution this industry could be making to the state's economy. Investment in research and development is linked to increased productivity. However, we see here the lack of value the government has placed not only on the industry but on the research that has the potential to identify new strategies to increase productivity. Where will the funding for the research come from? Will Queensland be reliant on research findings from other states? If this is the case, the findings will be of no use to producers as the uniqueness of the area will not be taken into consideration.

Minister, what is the value of the land and the herd? Minister, we want an ironclad guarantee that any money from the sale of the facility, the land and the herd will remain on the tablelands. The minister should hang his head in shame. This is not about a fresh approach; this is about flogging off what the government can to try to balance the books. Eventually people will want to know why food prices are astronomically high. It will be the fault of this government which, through its short-sightedness and stupidity, has failed to recognise not only the value of the industry but also the potential for the industry's expansion, which is dependent on continued investment in research and development. The federal government, with its grocery price inquiry, has made a thinly-veiled attempt to keep the pressure on food prices for the benefit of consumers. However, the state government has at its disposal the facilities, the resources and the people to continue the industry—

Time expired.