




Speech By
Dale Last

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

Record of Proceedings, 12 May 2016

MOTION: FEDERAL BUDGET, BACKPACKER TAX

 **Mr LAST** (Burdekin—LNP) (12.56 pm): Is it not the height of hypocrisy when this government can move a motion in this House calling on the federal government to abolish the backpacker tax which directly impacts on the agricultural sector, yet in the same breath show scant regard for our hardworking farmers around the state? Since being appointed as the minister all we have seen is the lack of any idea of how agricultural industries in Queensland operate. Last night we had the education minister stand up and say, 'Half a billion dollars will be ripped out of regional communities right across this country and there is deathly silence from the LNP.' I say to the education minister that that could not be further from the truth. It is obvious that the education and agriculture ministers have been living under a rock because if they had been paying attention they would have heard my speech on the backpacker issue during the February sittings. It is patently obvious that this minister has been asleep at the wheel when it comes to agricultural development in this state.

As I said on 25 February—yes, that is right, three months ago—talking to Burdekin fruit and vegetable growers, local growers, some of whom have been in business for decades, they are rightly concerned that they will lose the majority of their workforce. Whilst they would ideally prefer to employ Australians instead of foreign workers, they have found that backpackers reliably perform these labour intensive tasks. Queensland is the largest producer of vegetables in Australia, as well as the second largest producer of fruit. We have around 250 horticultural farms in Queensland and, combined with the agriculture, forestry and fishing sector, employ around 55,000. The Bowen Gumlu fruit and vegetable industry in my electorate alone has consistently produced around \$412 million worth of produce a year for the past five years. The annual influx of backpackers into the Bowen and Burdekin areas contributes an enormous financial boost to those local economies. You only have to drive through Bowen at the peak of the season to see the activity at the accommodation facilities, the hotels, the eateries and all the local businesses to know the impact that the backpackers have on those communities. There is no question that those communities would not survive without the use of the seasonal backpacker labour. Growers have already expressed concern about the potential impact on the horticultural industry.

I have confidence in the industry and I am currently working with Bowen Collinsville Enterprise to develop a food processing plant at Bowen because I am not content to sit back and rest on my laurels. It is about getting out there and actually doing something to create jobs in the agricultural sector. In my new capacity as the shadow minister for agriculture, fisheries and forestry I can assure this House, the people of Queensland and the hardworking constituents in my electorate that I am working feverishly to put Queensland at the forefront, particularly in my agriculture portfolio. Instead of scaremongering, I have been consulting with my constituents, with AgForce and industry representatives. Since the introduction of the second working holidaymaker visa for 417 visa holders, there is a dependence on those foreign workers for seasonal labour. If a grower needs 200 workers over a short four-to-six-week period to harvest their mango crop, there are real concerns in sourcing that volume of labour in the short-term, particularly in our small regional centres.

Despite the wild accusations of those opposite, the so-called backpacker tax has not yet been set in stone. I know the federal member for Dawson, George Christensen, has been assured by the Deputy Premier and the Treasurer that the tax is currently under review. Today I have spoken to the federal member and he assures me that he is doing everything possible to resolve this issue. Not for one minute should members discount the work that is going on on this side of the House to make sure that this goes away.

I know who I trust to look after our primary industries in Queensland and it is certainly not the Labor minister opposite. This is nothing more than a politically driven motion from a member whose connection with agriculture, in her own words, runs to once having a vegie garden. There are numerous facets to this debate. This motion has nothing to do with concern for our tourism or primary industries, and everything to do with playing politics and stirring up unnecessary concern in two of our key industry sectors. Instead of scaremongering, politicising and meddling with the federal government's taxation system, this government should concentrate on jobs and infrastructure projects for this state. I would expect a common-sense outcome to this issue, rather than the nonsense we have heard today from the member for Bundaberg.