




Speech By
Dale Last

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

Record of Proceedings, 23 May 2017

MATTER OF PUBLIC INTEREST

Sugar Industry

 **Mr LAST** (Burdekin—LNP) (12.18 pm): The sugar dispute between Wilmar and QSL, which was resolved this week, will go down in history as the dispute that almost broke the back of the sugar industry in North Queensland. After 18 months of toing and froing, finger-pointing, wild acquisitions and political posturing, the 1,500 canefarmers from the Wilmar sugarcane-growing areas can finally breathe a sigh of relief after an on-supply agreement was signed this week. The fact remains that this issue took far too long to resolve and that Labor's performance regarding the resolution of this matter was appalling.

When I was elected I made a commitment to resolve this issue with the marketing of sugar, because my farmers were telling me loudly and clearly that they wanted choice in the marketing of their grower economic interest sugar. I was proud to stand shoulder to shoulder with my canefarmers on this issue and I will continue to do so.

On 19 February, Tim Nicholls and I stood in front of 450 canegrowers at the Burdekin Theatre and gave a commitment that the LNP would introduce into parliament legislation aimed at resolving the long-running dispute between Wilmar and QSL. In accordance with that commitment, the LNP came to parliament and introduced the Sugar Industry (Arbitration for Mill Owners and Sugar Marketing Entities) Amendment Bill 2017. This bill was aimed at amending the sugar marketing act and would have compelled Wilmar and QSL to participate in compulsory arbitration with a view to having an on-supply agreement in place before the commencement of this year's crushing.

The LNP had carefully developed this bill over several weeks in close consultation with canegrowers and industry bodies. We rightfully pointed out in this chamber that the amendments in the LNP's bill were common sense and necessary to deliver a mechanism for negotiations between millers and marketers that could break deadlocks that may arise in finalising on-supply agreements. The LNP and I left no stone unturned in our argument in support of the bill, making it undeniably clear to each and every member the importance and urgency of the bill.

Labor, with the support of the member for Cairns and the member for Cook, voted against the bill and they should all be ashamed of their actions. They should be ashamed for abandoning canegrowers and their families, ashamed for abandoning rural communities that rely on the sugar industry and ashamed for abandoning North Queensland. Yes, on 28 February Labor appointed former Supreme Court justice Richard Chesterman as mediator to the sugar dispute, but more than two months later the dispute was still not resolved, with as many as 1,500 growers' livelihoods remaining in limbo.

Thanks to Bill Byrne and Labor, time nearly ran out for our growers, who would have been left with no option but to go cap in hand to Wilmar to sign a cane supply agreement. While Labor's ineffective mediation was dragging on, growers had to sit by and watch sugar prices slide by more than 20 per cent, with prices now back to \$480 a tonne from earlier highs of \$600 a tonne and more. Bill Byrne and Labor failed our growers. He and Labor were only ever interested in playing politics and siding with

multinationals. In the canegrowers' hour of need, when a viable option to resolve this dispute between Wilmar and QSL was presented to this parliament in the form of legislation, those opposite turned their backs and said, 'We don't care.'

Perhaps the most galling comment to come out of this whole dispute was from the agriculture minister when he said, 'This is a good result for this vital Queensland industry.' I would like the minister to come up to the Burdekin and tell canefarmers in my electorate how good a result it has been for them, when the contracts were signed only at the eleventh hour and they missed out on record high sugar prices. Growers feel betrayed by a government that has sided with a multinational company that puts profits ahead of people. They feel betrayed, frustrated and angry that, in their hour of need, this government deserted them. I will use the ineffable frustration and anger that I feel towards Labor and those who voted against the LNP's bill to further strengthen my resolve to continue my work on the behalf of growers and the Burdekin community.

Growers need legislation that will prevent a similar dispute arising again in the future. They need legislation that will deliver mechanisms for negotiations between millers and marketers, that could break deadlocks when finalising agreements. Such legislation will provide a safeguard for growers into the future—something that gives them assurance leading into the crushing each year and something that gives them and my community peace of mind. I and the LNP will continue our fight for growers. We will see to it that such a dispute is never able to rear its ugly head again.