




Speech By
Lachlan Millar
MEMBER FOR GREGORY

Record of Proceedings, 6 February 2020

AGRICULTURE AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr MILLAR** (Gregory—LNP) (12.05 pm): Today is a dark day for agriculture. Being true to form, the Labor Party has again abandoned the bush by introducing amendments to the bill to repeal the Queensland Agricultural Training Colleges Act 2005. What we have here is Minister Furner slipping in late amendments to allow him to wind up and dispose of the assets of the Emerald Agricultural College and the Longreach Pastoral College. He did not even have the courage to take it through the committee system. These amendments were not available to the committee. It is a disgrace.

The minister and the Labor government he represents are openly disdainful of the Queensland parliament. We see it in the way that these amendments have been brought in so late in the day. It shows that the Labor government has absolute contempt for agriculture. We are being treated to a demonstration of the contempt the Labor government feels for agriculture and regional Queensland.

Into an omnibus bill which is already amending some 18 acts, Minister Furner has inserted amendments to draw the curtain on over 50 years of agricultural training in the Central Highlands and Western Queensland. I am talking about the Longreach Pastoral College and the Emerald Agricultural College. The Longreach Pastoral College started in 1967 and the Emerald Agricultural College started in 1971. They are proud agricultural institutions in Central and Western Queensland. As the final slap on the way out the door, he is going to make sure the damage he has done can never be undone. He is going to ensure the assets are disposed of so Emerald and Longreach can never restore these campuses.

I should not feel so shocked or surprised. The Labor Party's handling of this issue has been brutal right from the jump. Minister Furner slammed the door shut just before Christmas 2019 in the middle of a devastating drought that was already oppressing people in Western Queensland. In fact, the minister went up to the gates at the Longreach Pastoral College and got a photograph of the gates being locked. It appeared that he honestly did not comprehend the slap in the face he was dealing out. He did not seem to be able to tell us what would happen to the staff, students and their families. Instead he held up the Coaldrake review as if it were the holy writ conferring a divine blessing on his actions. Its suggestions for future uses outraged many of my constituents throughout the seat of Gregory and many right throughout regional Queensland.

The minister then appointed a project manager to start the community consultation on the future uses. It should be noted that this is after the decision to trash decades of training at these campuses. This community consultation is all about what to do with the college campuses now that they are empty. The consultation is not about how the agricultural training can be saved. It is essentially consultation about selling real estate.

As the minister said, his Project Management Office was told to set up local community stakeholder committees in both Emerald and Longreach, so we have been waiting. Christmas 2018 was the first kick in the teeth with the gift of the Coaldrake report. Then Christmas 2019 saw the closure of the gates. We thought surely history will repeat itself and the minister will announce his decision as to the fate of the all-too-tempting real estate. As the *Longreach Leader* wrote in its 20 December issue—

The latest conundrum for the government is when to announce this major decision—one that will devastate Longreach especially ... One suggestion is to announce it in the new year when the majority of Queenslanders are on holiday and let the steam dissipate before the election.

Well we made it through the holiday season and still we are waiting. It turns out that the minister does not have the legal power to dispose of those assets—hence these amendments which were thrown in at the last minute without going through the committee system. It makes a mockery of the entire process from the start. It means that the Coaldrake review was based on a false premise. There has been an omission of genuine community consultation with the good people of Emerald and Longreach.

Why? Because these communities were presented with a question about what to do with the college assets, but the true question was never around saleable assets. There were no legally saleable government assets. The true question was around educational assets that were set up to be permanent and were intended to be permanent. This question was never put to Longreach or Emerald, just as it appears it was never explained to Professor Coaldrake. The Labor Party's community engagement fits so perfectly with the dishonesty that has characterised the minister's actions throughout this whole shameful saga. Now it is delivered through the sly insertion of amendments into this bill.

Of course the minister has prepared spin to say agricultural training will reach new heights under the Palaszczuk government. Last week the *Toowoomba Chronicle* ran a picture of a visit to TAFE Queensland's new rural centre of excellence. The article was titled 'Peek at a new facility', which is due to open on 11 February. I wish that new centre all the best. I just want to make some comparisons.

The \$7 million project consists of a simulated vet nursing facility, three traditional classrooms, a large area where machinery can be brought in and demonstrated, and a grow pod which is a vertical hydroponic farm. Compare that to what is being lost and sold off to pay for the Labor government's incompetence. I will start with the simulated vet nursing facility—presumably for treating simulated animals. The Emerald Agricultural College hosted vet students from two different universities so they could learn how to handle large animals like horses and cattle safely. They also learnt skills such as pregnancy testing. The Emerald Agricultural College was the only facility in Queensland that had sufficient herd sizes where veterinary students could perfect their skills through repeated practices on large animals.

Compare the vertical grow pods and machinery demonstration bays at our new rural centre of excellence with the magnificent Berrigurra property. This outstanding property near Blackwater provided students with hands-on experience with farming machinery and hands-on experience with broadacre cropping. This is what employees need in order to be job ready, not having to watch a demonstration and not having vertical hydroponics—at least not for most types of farming.

What about the Longreach Pastoral College? The loss of this institution makes absolutely no sense whatsoever. It is the only institution that teaches the skills needed for our valuable sheep and wool industry. Labor likes to boast about re-establishing the sheep and wool industry in Western Queensland. In fairness, I thank the Premier and Minister Furner for their continued support for exclusion fencing, but it makes that funding a kind of city dwellers fantasy when they turn around and close down the only institution training workers needed to operate in this industry.

Where are we going to get our classers? Where are we going to get our shearers? Where are we going to get the people to build the cluster fences which are so valuable for Western Queensland? We need to have rural based training and skill based training for agriculture in Central Queensland. These colleges provided so much to agriculture for well over 50 years. They were institutions started way back. Some of the names of people involved in the set-up of these agricultural colleges are leaders in our agricultural community—people like Sir James Walker, people like Mr Chandler from Barcardine, people who were involved in agriculture and who wanted to see an outback university teach future generations how to be involved in agriculture.

I would also like to pay tribute to some fantastic students and teachers at those colleges for over 50 years. One name synonymous with the Longreach Pastoral College is John Arnold. One of the best horsemen you will ever come across. He has taught so many students about horsemanship, caring for

horses and how to ride, muster cattle and be a part of the local community. To you, John Arnold, I am so sorry this has happened. I know this devastated you. It is something that tears your heart apart. Mate, you did so well and I wish you all the best.

That leaves us with the final conundrum: how much money will the Labor Party grab for the sale of those magnificent properties and how will they ensure that their Labor Party mates get a crack at it? This amendment to the bill that the minister has put up is disgraceful, and he should be ashamed of himself.

(Time expired)