



Speech By
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FOOD (LABELLING OF SEAFOOD) AMENDMENT BILL

Introduction

Resumed from 27 October (see p. 3306).

 **Mr KATTER** (Traeger—KAP) (12.30 pm), continuing: I continue my contribution on this private members' bill, the Food (Labelling of Seafood) Amendment Bill. In the last parliamentary sitting week when my speech was interrupted due to time constraints, I spoke about how this legislation had already rolled out in a number of areas in other forms and had been discussed. Whilst there had been many initiatives nationally and in some states, this had still not followed through to legislation, which is what we propose in Queensland. This legislation in terms of intent is not at all without precedent. Similar laws operate right across the country. We can buy seafood from a supermarket or a fish market. There are federal legal requirements for the country of origin to be stated. In fact, that extends to every single product sold, packaged or unpackaged, but not in the dining space. The law is silent in that area. That is what we are seeking to challenge with this amendment bill.

Since 2008, the Northern Territory has required a very similar scheme to what the KAP proposes in Queensland. In the Northern Territory there is a requirement for all venues to identify imported seafood at the point of sale to the consumer. This scheme has been operating successfully for the past 13 years. I was in the Northern Territory two weeks ago sampling their fish and there were certainly no complaints about it up there.

In 2017 and 2018, the New South Wales government debated a very similar piece of legislation moved by Labor MP David Mehan. Disappointingly, his bill was voted down. In 2017 New South Wales voted on the Food Amendment (Seafood Country of Origin Labelling) Bill 46 to 35, with National-Liberal MPs opposing the bill.

Our Australian seafood producers, whether they work in wild-caught, farm produced or the aquaculture space, operate to very high environmental and sustainability standards as many in this House would well know. That is certainly not replicated around other parts of the world. I suggest that Australia would be among the best in the world in terms of those standards. We regularly hear scary stories about where overseas our food is coming from. Certainly, people are more tuned in to the way in which their food is produced and the impact that it has. This very much fits in with many of the principles and ideologies that have been put forward in other forms by the government in this parliament.

We cannot say that these same standards exist all around the world. At the same time, the purpose of the bill is not to vilify those imported seafoods nor the dining outlets that participate in their sale. We acknowledge that there is a place for a variety of seafoods and a variety of different price points in selling that fish, but it is important that people identify properly what they are getting and are not misled. The real nuts and bolts of how this works is that any imported seafood can be identified in terms of regional, state or national origin if desired. They can be specific if they want at the dining outlet,

but what is satisfactory is simply putting 'I' labelling on the menu or at that point of sale so it is indicated to the consumer that it is imported. We just need the 'I' represented in much the same way as we have gluten free with 'GF' required on the menu. It is not that big an imposition.

If a pub, restaurant or cafe has been buying overseas fish but may not know if their supplier buys the fish from Egypt, Asia or Africa, that is okay because all they have to put is 'I'. They do not have to identify exactly what country it has come from. It should not be much of an imposition on those people. Providing that identification stops that misinformation which really has an impact on price.

The price is an interesting point to reflect on. A submission made to the seafood origin working group paper submitted to the Standing Committee on Agricultural and Water Resources said that a majority of Australian consumers are prepared to pay more for locally caught or produced seafood; however, they cannot consciously do this without being provided by default the necessary country of origin information.

We are denying the ability of these producers in all likelihood to get the proper price of their goods in comparison to that competition. For example, the ABFA suggest that the willingness to pay more is true for more than two-thirds of consumers who indicated that they would be prepared to pay a premium of up to 30 per cent for Australian seafood. That is a real opportunity for market-driven growth if we adopt this amendment to the laws.

To be effective, Australia's seafood industry body argues that country of origin labelling must be mandatory. I think that is a key point that comes up in the context of this legislation, because often it comes back to, 'Oh, we do not really want to force people to do stuff. Let us just invite them in to do it and just passively do that.' It is strongly identified that that is a big threat which pulls the rug from under any initiative. It can create perverse outcomes where labelling is foreign, many consumers believing the absence of labelling indicates that the seafood is Australian which undermines all the other efforts everyone else is putting into the labelling.

Moreover, there are industry-wide concerns that the participants in the supply chain have taken advantage of the freedom afforded to them by the voluntary country of origin scheme in the food service sector to price imported seafoods as if they were Australian. This bill is not only about stimulating, protecting and growing our own industries; it is about stopping these people from manipulating the system where they make more money by misleading the consumer, giving them imported seafood and passing it off as Australian. That is a really important part of this bill to consider as well.

The real intent of this bill is market-driven growth. We are certainly a net importer of seafood in Australia, but as I understand we never used to be. That should not be so. We have enormous capacity through aquaculture, our fisheries and our commercial catch to be able to feed ourselves. That is a really important point. It is probably why this bill has captured the attention of the KAP and why we felt it necessary to make sure this one made it into the parliament. It stops that exploitation of price. Surely we all have an interest when people go to market and gouge or mislead consumers by making more profit themselves by putting what I would call an inferior product into the market where it is passed off as something different.

As I said in the last sitting week in the initial part of this speech, most people associate the word 'barramundi' for instance with an Australian-caught fish. It could be an overseas barramundi but, as soon as it is called 'barramundi' when it is sold in the shop, restaurant or cafe, people immediately assume it must be Australian because it is barramundi and you are paying the full price for it. The majority of consumers would be prepared to pay 30 per cent more if they knew it was Australian. We are denying those people that opportunity when this sort of legislation is not in place.

Mr Dametto: There's a difference when you bite into it.

Mr KATTER: I take that interjection. You do taste a difference when you bite into it, particularly if you live in areas where you can access this fish readily and are accustomed to eating it.

Another important point to go back over is the showcasing of our ethical and environmental standards. There is a lot of pain suffered by the industry. We have often been a voice for the industry in arguing against the government imposing a lot of these standards. They are imposing these standards but then not allowing the industry to take full advantage of the imposition of those standards. The industry gets it from both ways in Australia. Without arguing the rights or wrongs of some of these standards, would the government not want to at least ensure that after all the effort they have gone to to impose these standards on the fishing industry they get the full benefit of them and give those benefits back to the industry? On that issue alone, I cannot see how the government could disagree with what is being proposed.

It is important to recognise—and I sure this will come up during the consideration of the bill by the committee—existing labels. The Queensland Seafood Industry Association with its 'Queensland catch' label does a fantastic job of promoting the industry. The 'Wild caught' label for barramundi is a good label that is identifiable. As I said earlier, it is not going to do the job if there is not 100 per cent buy-in and people are not forced to do it. There will still be an undermining of the industry. Where there is no labelling people will still assume it is Australian. That is short-changing the industry.

This is a warning to the House that we are not going to accept any watering down of this provision—that is, a passive introduction of this provision; an opt-in system or there being loopholes for people to get out of this. It needs to be implemented across the board to be effective.

Locally, I acknowledge Farmer Meets Foodie's Lindsey Hughes, a good fellow I went to school with. He is promoting locally caught produce out from Mount Molloy. He is one of many people who gets that 30 per cent premium from consumers. It demonstrates that it can be done. All we are advocating for is going that step further and making sure everyone can enjoy the benefits of making the effort to do this in Australia. It is a case of capitalising on the natural advantages that we have in this country.

The last major point I would make about why this is an important bill for the KAP is that it brings forward the principle of national interest. Perhaps it is considered we are doing it in a minor way here. The seafood industry is a big industry. We need to promote seafood labelling to stimulate our industry. I think it is a pretty fair criticism to make of governments at all levels that we have become globalists that are obsessed with free markets and economic rationalism. Today we are debating the proposed freeing up of regulations around cafes and pubs. There is this obsession with the global market. We often lose sight of the national interest and nationalist economics. Those living in the regions see firsthand the damage that causes and the prosperity that is forgone and handed over to overseas producers who take advantage of our effort and our primary resources.

This legislation that we are introducing into the parliament is a test case to see whether there is an appetite on the part of the government or the opposition to embrace nationalist ideals. We want to say to our industries, 'We are going to look after you.' We want to do things that will stimulate growth for our industries instead of being obsessed with allowing in cheap imports and making sure we do not have trade barriers so that everybody can bring things into our country. At some point we need to say, 'We have to do things for our own industries.' As I have said, we are now a net importer of seafood. That is a real shame. It is a blight on the management of our resources that we are not stimulating this industry enough.

We have brought a number of these sorts of initiatives into the House. The member for Hill has twice brought fair milk mark logo legislation into the House. It attracted some support in some ways, but it was rejected. That legislation advocated for an opt-in label for retailers to use that meant the processor was bypassed and the price went back to the farmer to try to stimulate the dairy industry. That is another example of a nationalist attitude to our economy and a recognition that we want food security and we consider it important that we maintain and assist these industries. That was the most passive, discreet way of market intervention. Even then, I remember in the debate in the House members commenting, 'You can't have market intervention like that. We do not agree with that.'

It brings to the surface the tension between economic nationalism and economic rationalism that we rarely debate in this House. There is hardly anyone opposed to it. It certainly does not come out at a policy level from either level of government. It is something that we in the KAP are strongly against, but not in the sense that having a free market or deregulation is bad. It is just that in some cases we need to pull up and say, 'Hang on! This industry is important. There are some real impacts if you compromise it by trying to make it compete with other countries that do not have the same ethical standards or environmental standards. You are making them compete.'

It becomes all about the consumer getting access to cheap product. There is a price to be paid for that. We see the cost of that daily. We have seen industry after industry collapse. We are slowly watching the dairy industry disintegrate into nothing. We keep introducing these bills and they keep getting blocked. People say, 'You can't interfere in the market.' Who is going to stick up for industry and the national interest?

There is an important principle being played out in Brisbane with the abattoir in the city. Everyone says, 'Let's just turn it into urban development. What a great opportunity.' What about having a family owned abattoir that employs local workers in Brisbane? That is in the national interest. Someone needs to stick up for the national interest. Forget about the owner, but do not forget the fact that an Australian owns it and they employ Australian workers in that abattoir which value adds to the beef that we produce. That is a really important principle to protect. Let us not just leave it up to the market and say,

'Oh well, it is not that important. Housing will go up there and the abattoir will be built somewhere else.' No it will not. A lot of the time these things collapse and we lose them. I cannot help but feel that no-one sees any value in it. In this House this government and others pay lip-service to it and say, 'We stand with the dairy farmers.'

It is not support where it counts—that is, when it comes to voting for legislative intervention in the market to make sure we preserve a spot for this industry and try to stimulate it because it is important to our state interest and our national interest. They are important points to make. We want to keep introducing bills like this into the parliament and watch closely how people vote on them and relay that to the Queensland public. We feel that there is not enough support for the national interest and it is not tested enough in this parliament.

It is important to send a message to people about seafood labelling. Like political labelling, let us show our true colours and indicate where we stand on these issues. Do we want to stimulate and embrace policies around economic nationalism or do we want to blindly adhere to free market policies where we deregulate the hell out of everything? We can pay a bit of lip-service to our industries, but when it comes to the crunch we let them go because that is how the market works. That is what we have seen with 90 to 100 per cent of policies that have rolled through this place in the last 20 or 30 years. A lot of people agree with that, and that is great. It is good to have a debate on this. We want to show our true colours on this and stand firm on our principles. It is important to test that.

We ask the House to treat this seriously. It is not an earth-shattering bill. It is a fairly discreet intervention into the marketplace. It needs to be mandatory: that is a critical component of this amendment. It needs to be implemented to demonstrate to people in Queensland that there is some consensus here in the state to at least provide some support to our domestic industries and that we would like to see these things develop. They are not going to develop by themselves. You have to stimulate that demand. It can be market driven through this amendment. We strongly advocate that the House consider this bill.

First Reading

Mr KATTER (Traeger—KAP) (12.49 pm): I move—

That the bill be now read a first time.

Question put—That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Bill read a first time.

Referral to State Development and Regional Industries Committee

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mrs Gerber): In accordance with standing order 131, the bill is now referred to the State Development and Regional Industries Committee.