



Speech by

Andrew Cripps

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

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PRIMARY INDUSTRIES ACTS AMENDMENT AND REPEAL BILL

Mr CRIPPS (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (4.08 pm): I rise to make a contribution to the Primary Industries Acts Amendment and Repeal Bill 2007. The bill amends the Sugar Industry Act 1999 and repeals the Banana Industry Protection Act 1989. The repeal of the Banana Industry Protection Act 1989 is to implement the findings of an independent review that recommended the dissolution of the Banana Industry Protection Board, rendering the act largely redundant.

The amendment of the Sugar Industry Act 1999 implements the first stage of the phase-out of the role of the Sugar Industry Commissioner by 2010. The bill removes the functions of the commissioner as they relate to the commissioner's role as a mediator and arbitrator of a range of issues including new supply contracts and, following deregulation of the sugar industry, discharges the responsibility of Queensland Sugar Ltd to fund the commissioner's position now that QSL is a wholly private sugar marketing company.

The sugar industry is a very important industry in my electorate of Hinchinbrook. It generates significant wealth and provides jobs and incomes for many communities in all sectors of the industry—the growers, those involved in harvesting, and, of course, milling companies.

With regard to the amendments to the Sugar Industry Act, the Sugar Industry Commissioner has been an independent person statutorily appointed under the legislation originally with a wide variety of responsibilities and powers. Following deregulation of the sugar industry, various responsibilities and roles of the commissioner have been reduced. The future of the office has been considered by industry organisations and, as I understand it, they do not object to the changes to the bill. The commissioner's two remaining responsibilities will involve the granting of access rights involving cane railway easements and permits to pass over land to facilitate the harvesting of cane and supply of cane to a mill. Indeed, these powers will be phased out in 2010.

The commissioner's role as far as mediation and arbitration in relation to cane supply contracts are concerned will no longer exist. These responsibilities have been rendered redundant by the fact that the QSL is a wholly private sugar marketing company. As QSL no longer has any statutory obligations to the Queensland government and deals only with milling companies that elect to market their sugar through QSL, the commissioner is effectively left without any participants in its jurisdiction.

The shadow minister for primary industries, the member for Toowoomba South, dealt with this matter extensively and I am sure that my colleagues, the member for Mirani and the member for Burdekin, will also deal with the matter when they speak to this bill. As a result I intend to focus on the part of the bill that deals with issues relating to the banana industry. As the member for Toowoomba South mentioned, approximately 65 per cent of Australia's bananas are grown in my electorate of Hinchinbrook. The industry directly employs thousands of people who are providing for their families and indirectly employs thousands of other people who are providing for their families.

During the debate on the Transport Operations Legislation Amendment Bill the member for Cook mentioned that he spent some time working as a taxi driver while he was a university student. I can advise the House that I spent a great deal of time working on banana plantations in my electorate when I was a university student, which is not so long ago, and as such I am familiar with the circumstances of the industry.

There is a general acceptance across industry groups for this act being repealed as it is felt that biosecurity issues relating to the banana industry are now more appropriately managed at a national level rather than a state level. The Queensland banana industry is a significant and valuable component of the state's horticultural industry and the regional and rural communities where it is located. It is arguably Australia's most important horticultural industry with banana prices being linked recently to both increases in, and holding of, interest rates. This is because of the status of bananas as a food staple in Australian shopping trolleys. As a result, this has a direct influence on the Consumer Price Index.

Compared with banana production areas of the world, Queensland is at present relatively pest and disease free. However, because the Queensland banana industry is so clean and green it faces comparatively high biosecurity costs to maintain strong quarantine standards. The impact of a foreign pest or disease outbreak in Queensland would be very significant as far as the banana industry is concerned. The member for Toowoomba South certainly made that point.

In 2003 there were about 870 banana plantations in Queensland, mostly along far-north Queensland's wet tropical coast area between Cardwell and Babinda. In recent years there has been an increase in the number of farms on the Tablelands around Mareeba and Walkamin. Queensland growers produce approximately 265,000 tonnes of bananas each year, which equates to about 90 per cent of production in Australia. Tropical Cyclone Larry in March 2006 caused an enormous amount of damage to the banana industry. In the Tully and Innisfail areas the crop destruction was virtually total. A bit further south in Cardwell damage varied between 60 and 80 per cent, while the areas around Babinda were about 90 per cent damaged. The Tablelands was also significantly affected, although from memory various growers fared a bit better than the coastal banana growing areas. The estimated value of lost production in the period 2005-06 was in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

While policy and legislation in respect of biosecurity as it relates to the banana industry is now more appropriately handled by the Commonwealth, recognition that the banana industry is important to Queensland means that the Queensland government ought to continue to make a strong contribution to the ongoing efforts to develop and strengthen the banana industry. In this regard, I hope that the department of primary industries will continue to be involved with research and development, extension programs and market development in partnership with the industry.

As I mentioned earlier, compared with other banana production areas around the world Queensland is at present relatively pest and disease free. Australian quarantine restrictions on imported bananas are in place to reduce the risk of exotic pest and disease incursions. The banana industry faces comparatively high biosecurity risks compared with other Queensland plant industries because the commercial production of bananas in Queensland is dominated by the cavendish variety, which has a limited resistance to many of the major pests and diseases that affect banana production. Commercial varieties of the cavendish banana are sterile and produce no seed. As such, propagation is undertaken through the use of plant tissue, cuttings and suckers. This increases the risk of transferring pests and diseases through the plant material. The lack of seeds means that it is difficult to develop resistant hybrid varieties from the cavendish. Therefore the banana industry has limited ability to overcome serious pest and disease threats through breeding programs and it is thus exposed to a greater degree to outbreaks of a range of pests and diseases from overseas which are currently not present in Queensland.

On top of this, some serious pests and diseases affecting the banana industry would be very difficult to eradicate if an incursion occurred. There is a limited number of chemical controls available to implement large-scale control programs for a particular pest or disease. That is also related to the fact that the banana industry has a continuous harvesting cycle. There are a group of particularly disastrous diseases that, if they took hold of the banana industry in Queensland, would certainly undermine its viability. The bunchy top virus, fusarium wilt, also known as Panama disease, black sigatoka, the moko virus, the banana bract mosaic virus and freckle disease are certainly amongst these serious diseases.

Members will recall that an outbreak of black sigatoka occurred several years ago in the heart of Queensland's banana growing region, the Tully Valley. I pay tribute to the Australian Banana Growers Council, the banana industry's peak body representing growers, which showed a great deal of leadership and discipline during that difficult time. An enormous surveillance and control effort was undertaken and for the first time ever the black sigatoka outbreak was eradicated while production continued. The department of primary industries and Growcom, previously the Queensland Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association, played a central role in coordinating the surveillance and eradication effort.

I raise with the minister specifically the issue of the disease fusarium wilt. I understand that the Queensland department of primary industries has proactively investigated the effects of this disease on

commercial banana plantations following a variation of the disease breaking out in the Northern Territory. Fusarium wilt is highly destructive as far as banana plantations are concerned and it is wide spread throughout our neighbours of Indonesia and Papua New Guinea. I am encouraged that the DPI has been so responsive to the threat of fusarium wilt and suggest that this is a demonstration of the benefits of strong professional and corporate commitment by the department to the banana industry.

The significant risks and potentially high costs of an emergency pest or disease incursion warrant extensive ongoing surveillance to ensure early detection and diagnosis. Research and development on pest and disease resistance and management strategies is critical. The banana industry has consistently demonstrated a strong commitment to the surveillance, containment and eradication of pests and diseases by providing funds through levies for research and development to many government and non-government agencies.

Developments in relation to biosecurity at the national level, including the signing of the national emergency plant pest response deed in 2005 with Plant Health Australia, support the view that vigilance is still paramount as far as pests and diseases are concerned. It has been suggested that with biosecurity legislation largely moving to the Commonwealth a clearer division of responsibilities is emerging between government and industry in relation to the management of emergency pest and disease incursions with increased industry self-management of established pests and diseases. I do not have any concerns about this because I have great faith in the industry organisations that support the banana industry. But I appeal to the minister and the Queensland government not to reduce in any way the financial support provided directly to industry or support extended through the department by way of funding extension services and research programs.

At this point I mention the outstanding support provided to the banana industry by the DPI officers and staff at the South Johnstone research station. They work very closely with industry on the ground and I certainly hope that continues.

I am aware that the grant-in-aid funding previously paid by the government on a dollar-for-dollar basis to the Banana Industry Protection Board and the banana industry, which will be disbanded upon the proclamation of this bill, has not been paid for some years for various reasons, principally because the board has been playing less of a role in biosecurity and quarantine issues as the focus of this effort has moved to the federal level. In the absence of the board and the grant-in-aid payments to that body from the government, I urge the minister to commit to ongoing direct funding to industry so that these efforts are maintained.

I understand the Queensland government is of the view that the department of primary industries will continue to provide some core services to the banana industry that reflect its responsibility under the emergency plant pest response deeds—those being regulation, enforcement and surveillance. The industry is moving to secure a funding source through a national levy to meet its commitments as far as the deed framework is concerned. As the member for Toowoomba South mentioned, that ballot is about to take place and the results will be known to us and to the industry in the near future.

In summary, we need to ensure that the core plant health regulatory functions of the department of primary industries are carried out appropriately and that control regulations of endemic diseases are enforced. We need to see a commitment to the retention and ongoing recruitment of departmental staff with core skill sets in plant pathology and other sciences relevant to horticulture to support all horticultural industries but particularly the banana industry.

Without identifiable career paths for people with these skills within the department of primary industries university students will not choose plant science as a career and we will not be able to replace these skills as current scientists on staff at the department retire or move on. This is a very serious issue. There have to be clear professional opportunities for younger people to move into the rural sector. I have grave concerns about the ongoing delivery of agricultural science training in plant, soil and animal science at Queensland universities. I wonder whether the minister is aware that the intake of agricultural science students in 2007 at the University of Queensland—that is, at both the Gatton and St Lucia campuses—has fallen to 12.

In recent years, this has resulted in significant staff reductions and restructuring at the University of Queensland Faculty of Natural Resources, Agriculture and Veterinary Science. There is a possibility that in the near future these degrees will be moved completely to Gatton and not be offered at St Lucia. Demand for appropriately trained staff will not subside in the agricultural sector in Queensland.

Mr Mulherin: Have you spoken to your federal colleagues who fund universities?

Mr CRIPPS: I understand that that is an issue, Minister, but the importance of the rural sector to Queensland's economy means that it is incumbent upon the Queensland government to play a role as well.

Mr Lawlor: Did you say 'as well'?

Mr CRIPPS: I did say 'as well'. We have to do some work in that area. I implore the minister to be proactive and look into some stronger partnerships with agricultural science departments at Queensland universities that will foster those career paths.

We need to ensure that an appropriate level of monitoring for exotic pests and diseases, especially on Cape York, is carried out. This is the most likely pathway for any future exotic banana pest or disease to enter the country. We need to ensure that the department of primary industries maintains a core capacity to undertake research as it is widely acknowledged that many of the most significant gains in banana productivity have been through the results of research at the DPI.

We need to ensure that the Queensland banana approved nursery banana tissue culture regulatory scheme is maintained. Without clean planting material, as I mentioned earlier, the establishment and spread of many banana diseases is inevitable. We need to ensure that the DPI control the movement of banana plants and planting material within the state and across state borders.

I certainly urge the minister to ensure that on an ongoing basis, in an absence of the grant-in-aid funding source provided directly to the banana industry, some other mechanism for support of the banana industry is established by the government in addition to the core budget funding provided to the DPI for the services that it intends to continue to deliver. The banana industry is of significant value to Queensland, both in an economic sense and in terms of the number of jobs that it provides for many families in far-north Queensland. It provides a quality, clean and green product to the domestic market—a product that almost everyone puts in their shopping trolleys. As such, I feel it is incumbent on the government to ensure that the banana industry is well supported as regards its ongoing biosecurity efforts, industry development activities and the training of appropriately qualified staff to fill research and extension staff positions in the department of primary industries.