



Speech by

Andrew Cripps

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

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PLANT PROTECTION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr CRIPPS (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (3.24 pm): I rise to make a contribution to the debate on the Plant Protection Amendment Bill 2007. This bill has been introduced to provide for a number of recommendations that have emerged from the recently released report titled *The economic impact of sugarcane smut on the Queensland sugarcane industry*. Dr David Watson was engaged by the government to investigate the economic impact of the disease and consider possible responses to facilitate economic recovery. Dr Watson provided a final report on 18 February 2007 to the Minister for Primary Industries and Fisheries and the Minister for State Development, Employment and Industrial Relations.

Sugarcane smut was first found in Australia in 1998 in the Ord River district in Western Australia. Sugarcane smut was first found in Queensland on a farm near Childers in early June 2006 by a cane productivity officer from the local productivity services group. The sample was diagnosed and confirmed by BSES Ltd and the Queensland Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries.

Following further confirmed instances of sugarcane smut in the Mackay and Herbert River districts, the disease is now regarded as established and widespread. The Queensland sugar industry is now, necessarily, pursuing an industry management and economic recovery strategy as opposed to quarantine or eradication strategy. Sugarcane smut is a serious disease affecting sugar cane which can significantly reduce crop yields. It is highly infectious and can be spread by wind or carried on clothing and machinery.

Across Queensland, sugar industry organisations are working to develop and implement local recovery plans to respond to the existing outbreak of smut or planning for a potential future outbreak in their region. Surveillance efforts to identify the spread of the disease in areas where an infestation has already been identified and in other areas where sugarcane smut is yet to manifest itself are being coordinated by the BSES in conjunction with the assistance of local productivity services groups and sugarcane growers.

As sugarcane smut is now deemed to be an established disease, no quarantine or movement control measures apply within individual sugarcane pest quarantine areas, although movement of planting material and machinery within those quarantine areas should still be in line with industry best practice. Movement of sugarcane planting material and machinery between sugarcane quarantine areas is still restricted and requires the approval of an inspector.

Developing resistant cane varieties is now considered to be the principal tool to be used to combat the effects of the disease on industry returns. The reduction in returns to all sectors of the sugar industry—growers, harvesters and millers—has the potential to be very significant. A number of smut-resistant sugar cane varieties are now being developed.

On the topic of plant breeding programs, this is an issue that the opposition has been consistently urging the government to invest in for many years. Regrettably, the government has not been listening. The government has not properly funded sugar industry research bodies like the BSES to pursue plant breeding programs that were focused on pre-empting events like an outbreak of smut in Queensland by developing smut-resistant varieties.

BSES officers on the ground in my electorate have been telling me that the trials that they are undertaking are several years behind schedule due to the funding restrictions that have been an ongoing issue for BSES since the government chose to remove its position as a statutory industry organisation and require it to undertake its activities on a commercial basis. Unfortunately, this has meant that the BSES has been required to keep one eye on commercial returns for its services and important programs like plant breeding have suffered. The BSES officers undertaking plant breeding programs have said to me that they would like to be far more advanced than they currently are in terms of their sugarcane smut-resistant varieties.

The member for Toowoomba South and the member for Mirani are long-serving members in this place and they have been here to witness many of the debates in this House as successive Labor governments have consistently whittled away the sugar industry. They both would be aware of the fact that the opposition has consistently warned the government to be proactive on the issue of plant breeding and increase support to the BSES to pursue programs to develop a range of disease-resistant varieties.

My predecessor in this place made many contributions to that effect so the government cannot say that it has not been put on notice that this type of event could compromise the sugar industry should a disease outbreak occur that we have not prepared for.

I would like to put on the record the consistent and concerted efforts of the former member for Hinchinbrook in raising this matter. The contributions are numerous and worth detailing. All the way back in July 1998 the former member for Hinchinbrook, in relation to the outbreak of sugarcane smut in Western Australia at the time, said—

Mention was made of the exotic disease, smut, from the Ord. That will require leadership from the state government in Queensland. This dreaded disease has the ability to devastate considerable areas of country. It can very often go unnoticed for some period of time. We believe that that is what may have happened in the Ord River. The disease can be carried by wind. It can be carried by contact through insects or equipment, or even by humans. One of the best prospects we have for combating this disease is breeding resistant varieties. As time progresses, I believe we will need government support to do that. We have to emphasise the need to crank up the breeding program over time.

In November 1999 there were already questions beginning to develop about the commitment of the government to the BSES. During debate on the Sugar Industry Bill the former member for Hinchinbrook said—

What is going to happen regarding the funding for the BSES is not very clear. That is of particular concern to the growers but more so the millers.

This acknowledged that the implications of disease outbreaks were an industry-wide concern. In May 2000 during debate on the Sugar Industry Bill my predecessor lamented the need for BSES to be commercially rather than research orientated. He stated—

The BSES was also forced out on the campaign trail to justify its position and collect funds to carry out the vital work with varieties and a wide range of other industry issues.

It is important that this demonstrated and consistent concern for the sugar industry on the part of the coalition be put on the record when issues such as the management of disease outbreaks is discussed in this place. In June 2001, during debate on the budget for that year, Mr Rowell again raised the issue of the government not providing appropriate support to the BSES. He said—

A proposal was put to the state government by the BSES for assistance relating to additional staff and subsidies. While it might have appeared from press statements released by the minister that the BSES was given additional staff that did not occur.

In April 2002 the former member for Hinchinbrook detailed the limitations that were being faced by the BSES trying to operate on a commercial basis. On that occasion he said this—

I turn now to the Bureau of Sugar Experiment Stations which is no longer a statutory body. It will now have to seek its funding through voluntary contributions. During February and May 2000, instead of attending to a whole range of pests and diseases invading the industry such as greyback cane grubs, orange rust in Q124 and widespread rat damage, this organisation's field officers were roaming around the state's sugar areas collecting money to ensure its survival. It was totally inappropriate for the government to bring in the legislation dealing with the issue at that time. Without the support of the BSES and the necessary assistance it provides to many growers we would be at a great loss.

My predecessor was a vigilant and dedicated advocate for the sugar industry imploring the government to take plant breeding seriously. During debate on the Sugar Industry and Other Legislation Amendment Bill, Mr Rowell was forthright in his criticism of the government for not providing active support. Mr Rowell said—

It appears that the government wants to wipe its hands of any support, and turning the BSES out to fend for itself at this time is just another example of its attitude to primary industries. One of the BSES's primary roles is breeding plant varieties, and over a period of time it has come up with some excellent varieties. What we have seen happening in recent times, because of a number of outbreaks of grubs, orange rust and so on, is that it really has not had a backup of a variety or a range of varieties that have been suitable to deal with that situation.

As late as May 2003 during the debate on the Sugar Industry and Other Legislation Amendment Bill (No. 2) Mr Rowell said—

In terms of plant breeding, increased funding must be made available—probably to the extent of some \$15 million over five years—to have an impact on the propagation of a range of varieties that would suit a range of conditions to increase productivity in the sugar

industry. A strong emphasis needs to be placed on diseases such as smut and orange rust, for example. These fungal problems, which could have been prevented, have reduced the capacity of certain varieties by at least 50 per cent.

In October 2004, during debate on the Primary Industry Bodies Reform Amendment Bill, the former member for Hinchinbrook maintained his campaign to have the government increase support to the BSES for plant breeding programs. He said—

I want to speak a little about the BSES, because it was probably very inopportune at the time that it was done. The industry was facing a whole range of difficulties. We had poor crops. We had orange rust. We had a need to breed varieties. Unfortunately, what happened at that time was that we saw the likes of the BSES people running around trying to drum up support. They were successful in getting support. I have to commend them for their great effort that they carried out in ensuring that the BSES kept on track because it would have been so easy for that organisation to have dropped the ball at a very critical time for the industry.

Members can see that the coalition has been actively advocating for better preparation for this very event over a long period of time but the response has been limited. Certainly since sugarcane smut was identified in Queensland in June last year I have been speaking with growers and representatives of industry organisations in my electorate who have expressed concerns about the progress of plant-breeding programs and expressed to me their strong view that funding to the BSES be significantly increased to address this area of need.

State government funding for the BSES has been hovering between \$3 million to \$4 million annually for some time. I understand at the moment it is approximately \$3.8 million. The former member for Hinchinbrook said in one of his contributions that funding for plant-breeding specific programs alone needs to be in the order of about \$3 million year or an appropriation of \$15 million over five years which would give the BSES much better security to pursue a concerted plant-breeding program.

I encourage the Minister for Primary Industries and Fisheries to recognise the significant need for a much better funded BSES, especially for plant-breeding programs, in light of the serious matters now facing the Queensland sugar industry in the form of sugarcane smut. This is recommended in the Watson report which proposes the augmentation of industry research and plant-breeding activities in order to increase the number and availability of varieties of smut-resistant sugarcane. Such an increase in support from the government will be long overdue for the BSES.

I recognise that since the Watson report has been completed the minister has certainly expedited the progress of this bill with some haste to provide a framework to allow non-resistant varieties to be planted in the absence of enough plant material from smut-resistant varieties being able to be sourced. This is a pragmatic and a responsible course of action, and I think the minister should be given credit for his efforts to that end. However, I think it is particularly regrettable that the minister sought to extract some sort of political advantage by trying to muddy the waters with respect to the unsuccessful application he and his department made to the Commonwealth and the other state governments for assistance for the initial smut-eradication effort.

The minister knows that that agreement is required from both the Commonwealth and the other Labor state governments, including the New South Wales Labor government and the Western Australian Labor government which are both sugar growing states. The states did not choose to support the application so the political manoeuvres undertaken by the minister to try to blame the federal government alone is not an accurate reflection of what occurred and it is inappropriate for the minister to continue to pursue those accusations.

Lastly, I would like to talk about some issues with respect to the list of allowable varieties. Current smut-resistant varieties have lower sugar content than non-resistant varieties due to the delays and funding shortfalls for plant-breeding programs. A ban on particular varieties that are not resistant to smut will result in some immediate production losses. The plant characteristics of non-smut-resistant varieties are in some instances just as important as smut immunity. So we have to be careful about how we remove varieties from the list of permitted sugarcane varieties. For example, sugarcane smut has been identified in the Herbert River district at Lannercost and Lannercost extension, Upper Stone and Macknade in my electorate of Hinchinbrook. However, because the Tully and Innisfail districts—also in my electorate—are located in the same pest quarantine area, variety restrictions responding to the smut outbreak in the Herbert River district has the potential to impact on other sugar-growing areas.

The Tully and Innisfail districts are well known for very high levels of rainfall. Certain varieties of sugar cane known as swimmers—various varieties in the Q series—are used widely in this area and have been developed to survive longer in wet conditions where the cane may be submerged under floodwaters for extended periods of time without significant c.c.s. losses. However, swimmers are not smut resistant.

As such, the government needs to be aware that it is not only the growers in pest quarantine area No. 5 but also all pest quarantine areas that grow sugar cane that will experience ramifications as a result of the smut outbreak in the sugarcane regions of Queensland. If certain areas can no longer use cane that variously is resilient in wet weather, resistant to orange rust or resistant to cane grubs, for example, productivity levels will be reduced even if the spread of smut is not rapid.

Members can see the dilemma for some growers—to suffer production losses from smut or to suffer production losses from other existing problems associated with cane growing. This underlines the need for the government to provide a significant increase in funding to industry organisations to pursue an expedited plant breeding program focused on addressing the current sugarcane smut outbreak facing the sugarcane industry.

The opposition intends to support this bill because it is important to provide an appropriate framework for the sugar industry to move forward from this point. I sincerely hope that there will be a clear adjustment in the attitude of the government to properly funding plant breeding programs in recognition of the enormous contribution the sugar industry makes to the Queensland economy and to the communities in regional and rural areas of the state.