



Speech by

Andrew Cripps

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

Hansard Wednesday, 8 August 2007

APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL AND APPROPRIATION BILL: ESTIMATES COMMITTEE G (REPORT NO. 2)

Mr CRIPPS (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (9.42 pm): I rise to make a contribution to the debate on the report of Estimates Committee G. In particular I would like to make some comments in relation to the responsibilities of the Minister for Primary Industries and Fisheries. I am obliged to the chairman, the member for Waterford, and members of the committee who granted me permission to sit in on the proceedings of Estimates Committee G. During the hearings the minister referred to Biosecurity Queensland. The state government effectively watered down its election promise to create an independent biosecurity agency in Queensland, instead deciding that a biosecurity unit would be established within the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries called Biosecurity Queensland.

The Queensland coalition and the Queensland peak horticultural industry organisation, Growcom, have questioned this second-best option on behalf of Queensland's primary industries. In this year's June budget the state government tried to claim that the size of the DPIF budget had increased. The Queensland coalition has questioned whether this took into consideration the straight transfer of staff and resources from other government departments such as DNRW and the EPA to form Biosecurity Queensland within the DPIF.

The minister knows that my electorate has a significant interest in primary industries including the banana industry, the sugar industry, other horticultural industries and the cattle industry. As such, I am particularly interested in strong biosecurity measures and arrangements being in place. This leads me to discuss the concerns raised by the Queensland coalition in relation to the chronic understaffing of the DPIF's intensive livestock environmental regulation unit, which has been left unable to service the cattle industry in north Queensland.

At the same time the state government intends to plan to introduce new fees for property and brands registration. These new fees will be imposed on cattle producers in north Queensland that are currently absorbing the costs of compliance with the National Livestock Identification Scheme. These new charges for property and brands registration will be imposed on north Queensland cattle producers when it is not even being serviced by the DPIF's intensive livestock environmental regulation unit.

The north Queensland cattle industry is growing and makes an important contribution to the state's economy. The fact that the Cape York Peninsula is particularly close, relatively speaking, to South-East Asia means that biosecurity risks are high in this area, making the intensive livestock environmental regulation unit's inability to service north Queensland of particular concern.

In 2006 Cyclone Larry caused extensive damage to public and private property in far-north Queensland including agricultural crops and business premises. The federal government provided very generous financial support to affected farmers and small businesses which was administered by the Queensland Rural Adjustment Authority. I want to raise one case that I approached the minister and the CEO of QRAA about on more than one occasion, because I think the circumstances of this case presented an unfortunate limitation that could have been solved by QRAA being willing to entertain an alternative interpretation of the national disaster relief guidelines.

The minister might recall that I made representations on behalf of Mr Ian and Ms Leah Thomson of Mystic Sands near Rollingstone regarding their application to QRAA for support under the NDRA Tropical Cyclone Larry program. The Thomsons are the operators of a refrigerated transport company which, although based in Rollingstone, primarily depends on businesses from the Tully, Innisfail and Mareeba districts for their southbound freight. The Thomsons made application for NDRA assistance in the wake of Cyclone Larry as their business had been seriously affected at that time. QRAA advised that their application had been declined as their business was not located in the defined disaster area. While the cyclone did not cause any damage to the Rollingstone area, the majority of the Thomsons' business was generated from the cyclone affected area.

The minister was good enough to give me some advice and argued to the CEO of QRAA that the Thomsons may be able to access some support along similar lines to recent changes to exceptional circumstances guidelines for businesses affected by the drought whereby if 70 per cent of someone's income was derived from a business in a drought affected area they would be deemed eligible for assistance even if they were domiciled in another area. We tried that, Minister, and QRAA would not accept the argument, and the Thomsons remain in a very precarious financial situation. I wonder if we could not revisit this, Minister, and help out a family business which has fallen through the cracks of the government's response to Cyclone Larry.

Lastly, I want to quickly raise the issue of the need for the state government to increase its contribution to sugar industry research organisations such as the BSES for plant-breeding programs in order to expedite a series of smut-resistant sugar varieties. The future of the Queensland sugar industry depends in part on its capacity to respond to these disease outbreaks and improve productivity through increased yields, and this requires investment in research.

Time expired.