



Speech by

Andrew Cripps

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

Hansard Thursday, 4 August 2011

APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL AND APPROPRIATION BILL: ENVIRONMENT, AGRICULTURE, RESOURCES AND ENERGY COMMITTEE

 **Mr CRIPPS** (Hinchinbrook—LNP) (5.29 pm): I rise to discuss the budget estimates hearing of the Environment, Agriculture, Resources and Energy Committee dealing with the portfolio of the Minister for Agriculture, Food and Regional Economies. The Gillard government's proposed carbon tax is a major threat to agriculture in Queensland. The minister admitted to the committee that the carbon tax would have an impact on agriculture in Queensland. I asked him what the Bligh government's strategy was to overcome the increased cost to farm inputs and loss of market share against imported products. The minister's reply was that yet to be delivered productivity gains as a result of R&D would be relied on to maintain the competitiveness of Queensland's agriculture sector burdened with the carbon tax.

I have every confidence in our research institutions, but it is a huge burden on them to expect productivity gains to overcome the massive cost of Labor's carbon tax. R&D productivity gains should be delivering increasing profitability and sustainability, not attempting to compensate for bad policies. The minister needs to stand up for Queensland agriculture against the impacts of the carbon tax.

I asked the CEO of the AACC about the future management arrangements of the Burdekin agricultural college campus. I was advised that two parcels of production land, one cattle and one sugar cane, would be sold and that the teaching and residential facilities would be gifted to an independent school. The CEO could not advise me at the time of the value of the infrastructure to be gifted. Advice provided subsequently indicates that the infrastructure to be gifted has been valued at \$3.7 million. The gifting of an asset worth \$3.7 million makes a mockery of Labor's so-called de-invest to re-invest strategy. This strategy supposedly involves the proceeds from the sale of AACC assets being used to provide alternative training opportunities. The question is: what additional training opportunities are being forgone by a \$3.7 million asset being given away for free?

Student to instructor ratios have increased at the Burdekin, Dalby and Mareeba campuses of the AACC. Dramatic increases in hours of training in the Burdekin and at Mareeba make it clear that additional instructors are required. It is a serious concern that, despite training hours declining at Dalby, student to instructor ratios still increased.

I asked the minister whether, in view of the outbreak of Hendra virus in multiple locations across Queensland and the logistical challenge facing Biosecurity Queensland in responding to the outbreaks in several regions at once, the Bligh government would support private vets by reimbursing the cost of personal protective equipment used when responding to suspected cases of Hendra virus. The minister refused to commit to support private vets who are on the front line of responding to cases of suspected Hendra virus, insisting that the expenses incurred were simply a commercial cost of doing business. This indicates that the minister has no understanding of the seriousness of the animal and public health challenge associated with the Hendra virus that is unfolding across Queensland.

Biosecurity Queensland does not have the resources to effectively respond to Hendra outbreaks at multiple locations across the state. As such, the responsibility is falling on private vets. I was shocked and appalled when the minister advised the committee that he had undertaken a Google search to determine the cost of personal protective equipment for vets responding to suspected cases of Hendra. Queenslanders need to know how many other important questions relating to serious issues concerning his portfolio are determined by the minister undertaking a Google search. The credibility of a minister who relies on Google to inform himself on issues regarding the response to a serious animal and public health issue must be questioned. The reasonable proposal put forward by the Australian Veterinary Association is about ensuring that there is adequate professional capacity across the state to respond to suspected cases of Hendra virus and to protect people.

I asked the minister if the federal government's suspension of live cattle exports to Indonesia had damaged Queensland's cattle industry. The minister said the suspension of trade would only have damaged Queensland's live export industry if the suspension had continued. It is a real concern that the minister thinks the federal government's knee-jerk and unwarranted decision has not hurt the Queensland industry. This indicates a disconnection between the minister and the reality about how the suspension of live cattle exports to Indonesia has financially impacted upon the cattle industry.

The Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences recently released a survey of 230 farm businesses across northern Australia between 24 June and 1 July this year. A snapshot of the results shows that more than half of the nearly 600,000 cattle destined for live export remained unsold, 326 employees were either laid off or not hired by businesses, including 64 in Queensland, 40 per cent of businesses deferred non-essential spending, 76 per cent have delayed mustering plans and 11 per cent deferred loan payments. Yet this minister says the suspension did not impact Queensland.

(Time expired)