



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

GRIEVANCE DEBATE

Biosecurity

SPEECH

Monday, 30 May 2011

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Marino, Nola, MP

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Ms MARINO (Forrest—Opposition Whip) (21:00): I am raising a very serious grievance on behalf of Australian apple and pear industries, Australian fruit consumers and the Australian environment—especially those plant species that are killed by fire blight. Australia was once a biosecurity island fortress, but the brick walls of that fortress, our biosecurity and quarantine programs, have been cut back and undermined by this government. My own state of Western Australia was the envy of the world as we did not have many of the world's major pests and diseases and as a consequence our fruit industry used no more than 40 per cent of the pesticides applied annually by eastern states growers and international exporting nations. However, almost a decade ago as a result of poor quarantine management a disease called brown rot of stone fruit was allowed to enter the state and it is now endemic, costing the production industry annually tens of millions of dollars.

The latest example of this contempt for and neglect of our border protection is the recommendation by Biosecurity Australia to abandon the need for adequate protocols to prevent the incursion of fire blight, leaf roller, apple curling midge and European canker with the importation of New Zealand apples. Fire blight is a bacterial infection found throughout New Zealand that devastates trees, leaving them with a scorched appearance that in severe cases looks like they have had a blowtorch applied to them. The Western Australian Department of Agriculture and Food advises that a serious epidemic of fire blight is likely to decrease apple and pear production by up to 50 per cent. But it is not just apples and pears. A number of other species will be affected. The control of fire blight once established will not be easy. The Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service identifies sixteen genera plants that can act as hosts across Australia. That is why it is so important to prevent it getting into Australia in the first place. That is why New Zealand apples have not been allowed into Australia in the past. Of course New Zealand apple producers do not like this, and it was inevitable that they would challenge Australia's border protection through the World Trade Organisation.

Australia should have been ready to stand up for our borders. Instead we have surrendered with barely a whimper. So why has Biosecurity Australia abandoned our borders? We can only assume it has done so because the Prime Minister has forced it to do so. There is a great episode of *Yes, Minister* in which Sir Humphrey is determined to prevent the minister getting his way on policy. Mr Hacker got around him by announcing publicly that what he wanted was already happening—the 'it has to happen, it's been announced' strategy. It is this form of political deception that our own Prime Minister has forced on Biosecurity Australia and by default the people of Australia. On her trip to New Zealand the Prime Minister needed a good news announcement to boost her profile so she announced that apple imports would go ahead. Therefore the border protection and quarantine of Australia were sacrificed to give this Prime Minister a good media story. Following this, Biosecurity Australia had little choice but to sacrifice our biosecurity because the only other option was to contradict a Prime Minister. She has hung them, and us, out to dry.

These are the same people who know what is at risk here, who for years have argued to sustain Australia's biosecurity. The latest proposals are an abandonment of the quarantine principles that have made us amongst the cleanest producers of high quality food in the world. There are no proposed uniform standards of management and inspection proposed for New Zealand orchards. Instead it is proposed to rely on New Zealand's 'integrated fruit production system'—in effect a quality assurance program managed by farmers under an accreditation system. It is not a quarantine program, it is a quality assurance program that is also used in South Africa and Argentina. Its purpose is to promote the product by standardising the fruit leaving the farm, not to prevent disease spread to another country. It is the same quality assurance program that exists in Australia. However, in Australia it is not used as an alternative to quarantine and it does not allow access for Australian fruit into any overseas market. There will be no standards applied for disease control in the orchards in New Zealand, and there may yet be no external audit of disease control in these orchards. Instead, Biosecurity Australia has pinned its hopes on every New Zealand fruit-picking back packer having a good day, on identifying diseased fruit and removing it. What are the chances of that?

In addition, the New Zealand Integrated Fruit Production system of quality assurance does not apply a measure for the maximum residue levels of antibiotics on fruit before export. Fruit arriving here can carry antibiotics including streptomycin, which is banned in Australia in the interests of preventing antibiotic resistance in human health but is still used in New Zealand.

Curiously, in its haste to abandon our strong borders, Biosecurity Australia has shown itself willing to drop its standards to below that applied by the United States. The US applies stricter quarantine protocols on New Zealand apple imports than those proposed by Biosecurity Australia. However, New Zealand has not been to the WTO to have the US protocols downgraded. Perhaps they thought Australia was an easier target and perhaps they have been proven right. Instead of relying on backpackers in New Zealand to maintain our border protection we should be demanding independent inspections of their orchards. Orchards with recorded fire blight outbreaks should not be able to export to Australia. And shipments arriving with trash—that is, the leaves and other plant debris—should be immediately rejected, as they would be by the US.

This quarantine debacle is highlighted by one astounding and very disturbing fact: Biosecurity Australia recommended protocols that allow for a minimum of 600 fruit samples from each consignment of fruit packed to be inspected and found free of quarantine pests for Australia. Six hundred pieces of fruit from each consignment may mean 600 pieces of fruit out of a number of containers of apples from a variety of sources. It may mean only one apple in a million being inspected. What do you think the chances are of finding an infected one? Simple maths tells you that it is a one-in-a-million chance.

That is the odds we are giving our national biosecurity: one in a million. The government's commitment to biosecurity is a national disgrace. Labor's 2009 federal budget slashed \$35.8 million from the quarantine and biosecurity budgets, leading to the loss of 125 jobs, and reduced inspections of arriving passengers and cargo. The sum of \$58 million was also slashed from the Customs budget, leading to 4.7 million fewer air cargo consignments being inspected each year and 2,150 fewer vessels being boarded on arrival. This neglect has set the trend that Labor has continued into the current budget.

In 2011, another \$32.8 million was cut from the operational budget of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, reducing the capacity of the department to deliver services to Australian agriculture.

I quote from Ally Mackay, who contacted me. She said: 'WA is now importing apples and the quantity from New Zealand is well in excess of 500 tonnes each year—that is, stone fruit. As more apples and pears are imported into the Eastern States from New Zealand and China, it is only a matter of time, perhaps 12 to 18 months, before local domestic markets are in serious decline.' That is an issue, as is the issue of our biosecurity. Ally also said, 'We were the envy of the world. In Western Australia we did not have the world's major pests and diseases and that, as a consequence, our fruit industry certainly used no more than 40 per cent of the pesticides applied annually by international exporting nations.'

In my electorate, these issues are very serious. The majority of apples and pears in Western Australia are grown in my electorate. The actual growers are seriously concerned about their biosecurity. The organic growers are extremely concerned. They have been talking to me on a regular basis and I thank them for their involvement in this issue and for their genuine concern about a very serious issue. Biosecurity measures in this nation, unfortunately, are taken far too lightly. We will find that, once we have compromised that biosecurity, with fire blight, a leaf-curling midge and European canker, we may be in a position of not being able to eradicate these particular diseases.

I condemn the government for not focusing far more on Australia's biosecurity. It appears to me that the announcement that the Prime Minister made in New Zealand pre-empted the capacity of Biosecurity to be able to manage the risk that goes with importing apples from New Zealand.