



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

GRIEVANCE DEBATE

Queensland Racing Industry

SPEECH

Monday, 3 March 2003

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Date Monday, 3 March 2003
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Questioner
Speaker Entsch, Warren, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Mr ENTSCH (Leichhardt—Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources) (4.54 pm)—At a time when rural communities throughout Queensland are struggling to recover from the ravages of drought, you would have thought that the Beattie Labor government would be doing all it can to help in the recovery process. Instead, we have the Queensland state government idly sitting by while we watch the death of country racing. The Queensland Thoroughbred Racing Board, in its allocation of racing dates for the 2003-04 season, has dramatically slashed the number of meetings that will occur.

The victims are only country tracks, with preferential treatment being given to boost racing in Brisbane, in the south-east corner of the state and in Townsville. Under Queensland Racing rules, Cairns races have been slashed from 38 to just 12, and Cairns will lose the very few TAB meetings that they have. I think they have about three or four a year. Races have also been lost at Mount Surprise, Coen and Georgetown; this year, unfortunately, we have also lost Chillagoe. We are also looking at the prospect of losing races in Laura, Cooktown, Mount Garnet, Oak Park and Einasleigh.

Less than 12 months ago, the Queensland racing minister, Merri Rose, was singing the praises of country racing—or, as she preferred to call it, provincial racing. In a statement to the *Courier-Mail* in June 2002, the minister said, 'The provinces are integral to the success of metropolitan racing.' Yet in praising country racing, Minister Rose was also sounding its death knell, lauding the formation of the Queensland Thoroughbred Racing Board and giving them free rein, as she said, 'to make decisions in the best interests of the entire racing industry'.

What about the best interests of the many regional and rural communities that are going to be hurt by this decision? The Queensland Thoroughbred Racing Board came into being in the last couple of years to replace the disgraced Queensland principal club which administered racing throughout the state. Some changes have occurred at the board level, but, as one of the local papers in my electorate quite rightly observed, Queensland Racing's philosophy appears not to have changed, 'seemingly embracing the same fundamental principles of sticking the knife into country racing to make room for the south-east corner of the state'.

As a result of Queensland Racing's decision, an estimated \$10 million will be lost by rural communities across the state, at a time when they have already been devastated by drought and falling commodity prices. Trainers, jockeys, feed merchants and other race workers will be immediately affected by the decision to cut race meets. Community groups who benefit from fundraising at race meetings will also suffer. One of the major beneficiaries of bush racing over the years—and rightly so—has been the Royal Flying Doctor Service. This will certainly have a significant impact on its capacity to obtain donated funds. The losses will be all the more bitter with the knowledge that the Beattie Labor government continues to get a windfall from TAB proceeds to the tune of some \$50 million a year.

Let me go through some of the clubs. As I said, Cairns is down from 38 meetings to 12. Cairns is a feeder for many other clubs in Far North Queensland. The reduced meetings will mean that there is a one-month block between races in the region. There will be a race on 26 April in Cairns but there will not then be another one in the area until a meeting in Innisfail on 24 May. The reality is that a lot of racehorses just cannot go that long without racing. They are being forced to relocate to places like Townsville, where the TAB meetings occur, to keep fit. This is at a huge cost to our trainers.

One of our local racing personalities is Paula D'Addona, who owned a stable of approximately 24 horses in Cairns. She has had to relocate her stable to Townsville. Local jockey Frank Edwards has had to move to Townsville. Rob Koch owns four horses and is a member of the Cairns Jockey Club. I was talking to Rob the other day. He estimates that more than 1,000 people have been affected, directly or indirectly. As I said, these include racetrack riders, stable hands, farriers, feed merchants, vets and racing club stewards. The list just goes on. What is even more tragic is that we see the end of some of our very old and established bush carnival events that meet only one weekend a year.

The Coen races, for example, ran from 1897 until 1999—for 102 years. Local families such as the Gostelows and the Shephards bred, owned, trained and rode their racehorses. Fortunately, that sort of thing is still going on in Laura and Cooktown, although we are not sure for how long. Morris Shephard and Archie Armbrust were founding members of the Coen Jockey Club and very much the mainstays of the Coen races. Those races were very much a local community and family event. Morris's niece Doreen Quartermain from Watson River Station was one of a number of female jockeys. Archie's stepdaughter, Irene Taylor, who is 86 years young, was the patron of the club until it folded in 1999. The reason it folded is that it had become too expensive for the Coen Jockey Club to build the infrastructure that Queensland Racing demanded—equipment like photo finish towers, stewards' rooms et cetera. For one day or one weekend a year, the club could not afford to build that infrastructure, and so they had to close. In their wisdom, they donated all their infrastructure and equipment to Laura, so that at least one club was able to survive, given that it was so important to the community.

The Laura Club is 106 years old, having also been founded in 1897. Again, it is a club in which I have to declare a very strong interest, in that I have been actively involved in sponsoring and supporting races there since 1989. A lot of money—some \$65,000—has been spent in recent times on building the infrastructure there. Again, you only have to look at the list of families that have been actively involved in supporting these races to realise the huge concern. This is not just about money; this is the whole social infrastructure of the area. Once a year, all the families in the Cape get together, meet at these clubs and are able to socialise et cetera. For businesses in these communities also it is almost a peak. They get a lot of outside money—it is not just local money—coming in when people go out and enjoy the bush atmosphere. All of this we risk losing.

At Cooktown, the club is 108 years old. It is the second oldest club in Queensland and, again, it is under threat. It is criminal that Queensland Racing could consider, purely because of the dollar value, shutting these clubs down—because it wants to maximise its return out of the TABs. The impacts for many families who have been involved for generation after generation are going to be severe. The whole thing is run by dedicated volunteers. Nobody gets paid to run those clubs. They know that it is about more than just the dollar value; it is about social interaction and the whole social fabric of the area. For many of the communities, these race meetings are equivalent to the Royal Easter Show or the Canberra Show, and they are gazetted public holidays. Can you imagine if we wanted to abolish the Royal Easter Show, the Brisbane Show or the Canberra Show? Such outrage would be felt. To these communities, these race meetings are exactly the same as those shows are to their communities. Merri Rose has effectively washed her hands of the responsibility for country racing in Queensland. As a result, country racing in Far North Queensland and right throughout the rest of the state is being pillaged to prop up the industry in Brisbane. As I said, this is not simply about money; the social and cultural impacts of the decision also need to be considered.

Merri Rose is the Minister for Racing in Queensland and the racing board is a state government quango. It is not too late for the minister to wake up and see reason. Not only does she have the authority and the ability to step in and save country racing from being slashed and burned in Far North Queensland; she has a responsibility to do that. If she fails to take action, I suggest she should resign. If she is not prepared to do the right thing, I believe she should be sacked. It is interesting that the other state Labor members in Far North Queensland have been absolutely mute on this issue. We have four of them up there—Steve Bredhauer, Leslie Clark, Desley Boyle and Warren Pitt. If their minister is not prepared to stand up for country racing, I would ask them to get up on their feet and make a statement about it. (*Time expired*)