



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

Drought

SPEECH

Tuesday, 27 May 2008

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Cobb, John, MP

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Mr JOHN COBB (Calare) (4.33 pm)—In November 2002, the Rural Lands Protection Boards of Bourke and Brewarrina became the first areas of south-eastern Australia to be declared to be in exceptional circumstances in the current drought. That was some 5½ years ago. In less than a fortnight Bourke and Brewarrina's exceptional circumstances standing time frame expires. The new government and the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Tony Burke, have to act very quickly to allay the fears of the people of that region and the mental stress that they are currently going through. The major part of New South Wales does not come up until September. It is a very big issue for not just the landholders but the townspeople, the merchants and those in employment in that region. There are some 500 landholdings under the Rural Lands Protection Boards of Bourke and Brewarrina. The National Rural Advisory Council, or NRAC, who advise the government and the minister on the need for exceptional circumstances assistance, have not at this point in time visited Bourke and Brewarrina. With less than two weeks to go, I find that either exhilarating, because it means the minister does not think there is a need and he is just going to roll it over, or very disturbing, because he has no intention of doing so. It is very much time that the minister stopped looking at politics and started looking at policy, because for Bourke and Brewarrina to lose exceptional circumstances assistance at this time, notwithstanding the fact that there is talk about some sort of transitional phase, would be devastating to that region.

Yes, there has been some rain in that region but we do not stop areas receiving exceptional circumstances assistance simply because there has been some rain. It goes a lot longer than that and a lot deeper into the community. As I said, people's mental stress—and I am not talking just about the farmers and the landholders—in that region is huge. Nobody has yet made any money. The financial drought is still 100 per cent in that region, as it is in pretty much the whole of my electorate. I have no pleasure in having the most drought affected electorate in Australia. It is time for an announcement, especially as people cannot stand not knowing what is happening. The government must make an announcement. Minister Burke has to stand up and say what he is going to do to relieve the pressure on the landholders and everybody else involved: the merchants, the workers and the banks, who also have a lot riding on this.