HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

FARM HOUSEHOLD SUPPORT AMENDMENT (ADDITIONAL DROUGHT ASSISTANCE MEASURES) BILL 2008

Second Reading

SPEECH

Tuesday, 3 June 2008

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Mr TURNOUR (Leichhardt) (9.24 pm)—It is great to be here tonight to support the Farm Household Support Amendment (Additional Drought Assistance Measures) Bill 2008. Exceptional circumstances were established under the Hawke government, and it is great to be part of a Rudd government supporting that long tradition that we have had in supporting regional and rural Australia. I was lucky enough to be born from farming stock. My parents had a property in the Northern Territory, 60 miles south of Darwin, and ran cattle and grew small crops. I currently live in Cairns and represent rural people in the Cape York Peninsula area. I have also worked extensively in western Queensland.

Having been born in the Territory and coming from tropical North Queensland—and I know the member for Kennedy would understand this—I can tell you we get a lot of rain up there and we are lucky to come from an area that does not necessarily suffer from drought. But, having come from a rural background, I do understand, having worked in the Gulf and areas around Charters Towers and, in part of my earlier career, around Moura and Emerald, that these are some of the areas that have had significant drought problems over the last five to 10 years. This bill is an important one in providing support to those farming communities.

We talk a lot in the Rudd government about working families. There are working families out in rural and regional Australia that this bill is about supporting. It extends exceptional circumstances payments to small business operators in towns or communities of fewer than 10,000 people. Exceptional circumstances was originally established to support farming families, but there is an increasing recognition that drought not only impacts on farmers and graziers but also impacts very strongly on those communities. There are small businesses in those communities that have been suffering through this drought, and it is great to be here tonight supporting this bill that will extend exceptional circumstances payments to some of those businesses and working families out there in rural Australia who are doing it tough.

The bill also allows those businesses—farming and other small businesses—to earn more off-farm income. Allowing them to increase the amount that they can earn from $10,000 to $20,000 is effectively doubling that. When they are out in rural Australia doing it tough, working people know how to work and they want to get out there and do more to support their families. They are looking to make off-farm income and are looking to get out and make a quid to support their families. They do not like taking welfare.

Rural people do not like receiving welfare but, sadly, under the drought that we have had for an extended period of time, many people who have not previously had to get welfare have had to. It is also sad that the many small businesses that will benefit from the change that this legislation allows and brings into being—the ability for us to continue to make those payments and recognise those that have been made in the past—will be getting welfare for the first time. They want to get out there and work, so allowing them to earn not $10,000 but $20,000 allows them to also get out there and make more money to support their business.

The legislation also provides some concessions under Austudy and youth allowance for means testing. There are plenty of people out in rural and regional Australia who are actually asset rich but cash poor. When you are in drought, you might have a $1 million or $2 million property, but you are not actually making any money. Similarly, if you have a small business in town—whether it is selling groceries, running a tourism enterprise or selling farm machinery or agricultural supplies—when farmers are doing it tough, they do not come through your door and you do not make a quid.

People also may not travel to regional and rural areas because they are concerned about the drought—they have heard about the drought and there is not the incentive to get out there and travel as much. So there are people in all sorts of businesses who, while they may not be working directly as farmers or graziers, will benefit from this because they have previously had income and they may have significant assets but they do not have any cash.

We want to ensure that young people who want to get an education do not have barriers put up. This legislation will allow concessions to be provided in the means testing components so that they can access Austudy and
youth allowance. It will also allow those new people with exceptional circumstances to get healthcare cards as well. So it is a tremendous bill in terms of supporting people in rural Australia who are doing it tough. Coming from rural and regional Australia and working there all of my life, I do understand that there are people out there doing it tough.

The history of this long drought has been a very long one, and it was great to hear the member for New England speak tonight about some rain. The drought seems to be an act of God. For those listening to the broadcast tonight, the lights have just gone out in Parliament House, so we are standing here in the semidarkness. But I will continue.

A government member—It’s mood lighting!

Mr TURNOUR—It is mood lighting; that is correct! This has been a very long drought, and there are still 84 areas declared as under exceptional circumstances. Twenty-seven of these have been in continuous declaration for longer than six years.

When I look at maps of the different states in Australia I can see very large areas of Australia that are still declared as under exceptional circumstances. I recognise, as the member for New England has said tonight, that there has been rain falling across the country in places that have not seen it for a long time. The rain in south-east Queensland was great, and dams there have risen to around 40 per cent—that is great news. (Quorum formed) With the lights in the chamber down, I was going to go on and talk about climate change because I think it is a very apt time to talk about it, particularly in terms of talking about drought.

I made the point that there are 84 areas declared as under exceptional circumstances in Australia and 27 of them have been declared for longer than six years. There is no doubt that this drought has been longer and more devastating than many droughts in the past, if not ever. There can be no doubt that climate change has been part of the impact that has brought on this drought. The Australian government’s Bureau of Meteorology statement on its website entitled ‘Long and short-term rainfall deficiencies persist’ says:

The combination of record heat and widespread drought during the past five to ten years over large parts of southern and eastern Australia is without historical precedent and is, at least partly, a result of climate change.

The Bureau of Meteorology is in agreement that climate change has been a major cause of this drought, if not a significant reason that farmers and rural businesses out there are doing it tough. Therefore, it is very important that, although I rise to support this bill tonight and provide support for farmers and small businesses out there in rural Australia, working families doing it tough, we have another look at drought policy. I was pleased that the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry earlier this year announced that the government will be undertaking a comprehensive review of drought policy.

The climate is changing not only in Australia but around the world, and drought is all about the fact that we are not getting enough rain in large parts of Australia. It is extremely important to have another look at the drought policy going forward to make sure that it is providing the support that is needed to rural and regional Australia. I heard the contribution from the member for New England, and I have seen him back in the chamber today talking about zero-till farming and the changes in farming practices that we have seen over the last 10 to 20 years. I support his comments in relation to the need to get more information, more research and more data. There are people out there doing good work in this area in looking at how much carbon is being stored in soils and making sure that is something we can look at in the years ahead as part of any trading scheme. That is certainly something that I have looked to support and to make sure we are getting the right information into the system in relation to, because climate change is real. It is happening.

I know there are some members opposite who are still sceptical about that, but it has been a major reason that we have had an extended period of drought. It is very important that we as the government not only support farmers and small businesses in rural and regional Australia but actually take action to ensure that we are tackling climate change and providing farmers with the support to manage and deal with it into the future. I commend this bill to the House. I strongly support it. Coming from a farming and a rural background, I understand how hard people are doing it out there, how tough it is for working families out in regional Australia. I am proud to be part of the Rudd government that continues the tradition of Labor governments supporting rural and regional Australia.