



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

BILLS

**International Fund for Agricultural
Development Amendment Bill 2012**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Wednesday, 6 February 2013

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Katter, Bob, MP

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Mr KATTER (Kennedy) (12:34): It is really very difficult for the Parliament of Australia to say that we should find \$126 million to help people in these countries. This is no doubt that there are farming families going hungry in Australia now. These are people who scrimp and save and work themselves to the bone and try to pull back on any expenditure that they can. You have a situation in Australia in which these people are very oppressed by the forces acting upon them. I have not seen recent figures, but two or three years after the dairy deregulation there was a farmer committing suicide every four days in Australia. These are people in really desperate straits. You say that people in these other countries are in desperate straits—I cannot imagine being in more desperate straits than those that lead you to commit suicide.

The song chosen to commemorate 200 years of Australian settlement was written by Graeme Connors. Graeme is very famous for his song *Let the Canefields Burn*, which has these lyrics:

Let the politicians and the bankers in the city look up

In wonder at the glow in the sky.

Let the canefield burn, let me feel no pain

When I drown my soul in whisky, and dance in the flames.

That occurred on a cane farm south of Brisbane. A person drove his car into the middle of the cane fields and set them alight. It also occurred on a station property south of Charters Towers, my home town these days. The banks were foreclosing. The farmer said, 'You'll never take this farm off my family.' He prevented that by setting the house alight and burning himself to death. These are terrible things.

When the Prime Minister came to North Queensland after Cyclone Yasi, I stole 15 minutes of her time to take her out to a family grave in Tully. The entire family is buried there because they were blown to smithereens. A relative of the family is a very close confederate of mine and I know the story well. The banks were foreclosing again. These two little children and their mother and father were blown to pieces. And we are talking about sending \$126 million overseas. How can we do that when these things are taking place in our own country?

We had a debt summit. I thank the Treasurer very much for the debt summit—actually, we cannot really thank him until we get something out of the debt summit, but it was good of him to hold it. The debt summit was called because the debt of farmers has risen over the last four or five years from \$700,000 to \$1.1 million. That was last year. The figure for this year is \$1.4 million. That is the average debt per farm in Queensland. The average value of farm in Queensland would be around about that same figure. That would mean that the average farmer in Queensland is technically bankrupt. And yet we can find \$126 million to send overseas. Are their circumstances worse than ours?

I cannot go overseas and change the way that government operates there or stop the hatred or tribal feuds that lead to people killing each other in these countries instead of spending the money where it should be spent. I cannot help them. But I most certainly could use that \$126 million to help our own people here in Australia. Let me switch from qualitative commentary to a quantitative comment. The dairy farmers in Victoria are setting the woods on fire. There were 21,000 dairy farmers in Australia before the then Victorian Premier, Mr Kennett, started with his deregulation. It rather amazes me, actually, because some of the dairy farmers down there say, 'If only we can get rid of Julia Gillard.' I say, 'Hold on a minute. You were deregulated under a Liberal state government.' They say, 'No, it was the federal government.' The federal government was the Liberal government of John Howard. The deregulation in Victoria took place under a Liberal state government and a Liberal federal government. I don't know how you can contort yourself into blaming the Labor Party! No wonder they tried to keep me out of the dairy pavilion at the cattle show! They were going to get the police to prevent me from going in there! I said that I welcomed it as I had not had publicity for a good week, so go right ahead!

But it was right for them to try to do that—these fanatical, obsessive, rusted-on supporters of the LNP. They must ask themselves what they have got for 12 years of loyalty to the federal Liberal Party. Just ask yourself what you got. What did they do for you? Although I do not think that would be a question anyone would pose. They would say: what did you do to us, not for us?

We have gone from 21,000 dairy farmers to under 6,000 dairy farmers in Australia. In my own area we have gone from 240 to 42. I was on the telephone to the editor of the Gympie paper last week and he informed me that they had about 150, and he would now be flat out naming 10 there. When I went to Mildura, I drove through kilometre after kilometre of oranges just falling on the ground rotting, and vineyards rotting. I addressed a meeting of about 150 that night and it seemed to me that about one in 10 farms had closed down. One of the people who is in charge of things there got up and said, 'No, it is closer to one in five in the Mildura area that have closed down.' Think of the human heartbreak that would be behind those rotting fields.

Let me again quantify this. And for those who think I am exaggerating, you can check the figures yourself. Cattle numbers are down 23 per cent. Sheep numbers are down by over 60 per cent. Sugar is down 17 per cent. The dairy herd is down by over 31 per cent. Those are your four major agricultural industries in Australia. Every single one of them has fallen straight through the floor. In pork, some seven or eight years ago we became a net importer. We cannot produce enough pork to feed Australia and now we have to import from overseas, because our pork producers have all gone broke. Five years ago we became a net importer of fruit and vegetables. Imagine that a country like Australia now cannot feed itself with fruit and vegetables. With seafood, we were a fairly big exporter up until three years ago. Last year we imported 72 per cent of our seafood from overseas. The citrus and grape industries are almost completely wrecked and destroyed.

This has not been done continuously by penguins from Antarctica! The people who sit in this room are responsible. If you track back every one of those decisions, they were made by people in this room and in similar rooms in New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland et cetera. Their decisions are responsible for this. They tell us about wonderful free trade. I wish they would tell us of some other countries where there is wonderful free trade, because the average subsidy levels are 41 per cent. Don't give \$126 million to people overseas, because the good book says to take the splinter out of your own eye before you start trying to take the splinter out of somebody else's eye. If your own rural industries are falling to pieces and dying, particularly when it is your fault that it is occurring, then I think the last thing in the world that you should be sitting here talking about is sending money to farmers overseas. Why wouldn't you give it to your own farmers?

The previous speaker spoke about the terrible Labor government. Well, we just had a Liberal government installed in Queensland and in one year we have three laboratories for testing for disease, and John's disease has closed down quarantine and closed off operations in between one-fifth and one-tenth of all of the station properties in North Queensland. Yet, are they opening the laboratories so that they can test faster and overcome the problem quicker? No. They are closing two of the three laboratories. They are closing the one in North Queensland, where most of the problems are. They are closing the one in Toowoomba, which is in the heart of agricultural country. But they are keeping open the one in the middle of Brisbane—there is a lot of agriculture in Brisbane! We are now going to take the disease, the microbes, off an aeroplane and straight through the centre of Brisbane. That is what the government has done.

We had 15 vets employed by the state government—an absolute disgrace to the ALP government, which slaughtered agriculture in the state. But this mob have already cut it to 7½ vets. The number of vets will be cut clean in half. This is at a time when we have John's disease running rampant in the state.

The financial counsellors, of which there were pretty close to 20, have been reduced to zero. As to the pest and weed research station, the prickly acacia has now taken over an area the size of Tasmania and, on present projections, it will be an area the size of Victoria pretty shortly. It has destroyed what were, on the map, described as the best natural grasslands in Australia; it is now a prickly-tree infested area. And I am not talking about a small area; I am talking about an area bigger than Tasmania—seven million hectares, so far. But at the speed at which it is travelling, within five years it will be the size of Victoria.

Has the government addressed this problem? No. The only mechanism for combating it, the pest and weed research station for Queensland, has been half closed. Half of its entire staff have been sacked. So the Queensland Liberal government has gone through agriculture with a winnowing scythe, and if anyone thinks a change of government is going to help agriculture, well, I wish them well in trying to convince the people of Australia in

agriculture that that is the case! And if our party is going like a bushfire in Victoria, who can blame the poor people down there for looking for people who are concerned about them?

Tell me of a single speaker in the LNP in this parliament who has said a word against his own government. I was in this place as a National Party member for six years, and I had plenty to say about what my own government was doing that was disastrously wrong, and I belonged to a party with, I think, 17 members in the House of Representatives—a party that has virtually nobody here now. The ones from Queensland belong to the LNP of Queensland, which is an affiliate of the Liberal Party. I do not know what they are doing in here calling themselves the National Party because they are members of the Liberal Party. So it is a party that really does not exist much. There is a little bit in New South Wales and nothing left in Victoria. The recent polls there indicated they were on 2½ per cent; our party was on 4½ per cent, and we had only existed there for nine weeks.

If you cannot fight for your people then what the hell are you taking your \$200,000 a year for? You might say, 'Oh, we fight behind closed doors.' I was behind those closed doors; there wasn't too much fighting going on, I can assure you! In fairness to my colleagues of those years, most of those who left had just lost heart to such an extent that they just did not want to fight anymore; they just laid down and died, and the electorate took them away. A lot of my colleagues simply resigned from this place or, like me, left the party. The honourable member for New England is here because he said that if a certain person ran then he would run; well, that was two seats gone, because I left and became an Independent, and then he ran and they had lost a second seat. I do not know how many other seats in Australia they have lost. But if you betray the people and the ideals on which you were founded—and the Country Party was founded to deliver a single-desk seller in the grains industry—
(Time expired)