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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Dung Beetles

SPEECH

Monday, 24 November 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Fitzgibbon, Joel, MP

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Mr FITZGIBBON (Hunter) (11:43): I congratulate the member for Canning for bringing this matter before the House today. I suspect there would be many people out there who may have seen this motion and thought it a little unusual for us to be talking in the parliament about dung beetles. That is to be expected because we have a rather dry and witty sense of humour in this country. I can understand why people would be raising the question: 'Really? Dung beetles? Is that all you have to talk about in the national parliament?' I understand that. Those of us, including all of those currently in this chamber, who have an interest in and a passion for agricultural issues will fully appreciate the relevance and importance of this debate. On that basis, I congratulate the member for Canning. I join with him in his suggestion that maybe both the federal and the state governments could do more in funding terms to ensure that we further progress this very important area of research.

I take the opportunity to congratulate the CSIRO and others, who have already been very much in this field and who, unlike most in the general community, have a very, very solid understanding of the critical nature of that work and the very good things that it can do in relation to, for example, improving our soil quality in the agriculture sector, improving nutrient levels and indeed delaying nutrient run-off from our agricultural land and all the negative impacts that can have.

I did not hear everything that the member for Canning said, unfortunately, as I was caught up in meetings. I do not know whether he mentioned flies.

An honourable member interjecting—

Mr FITZGIBBON: He did mention flies? I recognise the fact that he has done that. Most of his speech was devoted to flies. Few Australians probably understand the importance of dung beetles, but I think most Australians understand the great Australian fly and what an inconvenience it is to all Australians, whether it be around the barbecue or working the land. Dung beetles play a very, very important role in removing that product, which becomes a breeding ground for flies and which attracts flies. This is very, very important work. If we could do more to have people connect dung beetles with the fly infestation problem that we encounter in this country, we would probably have more debate about dung beetles and more people discussing the importance of properly investing in research and development in this area. I acknowledge what the member for Canning was saying about new potential breeds from other countries, and I know that France was one of them—breeds which are active at different times of the year or, therefore, during different seasons, which would of course expand the scope and effectiveness of dung beetles. Again, I would join with the member for Canning in working on a bipartisan basis to overcome any quarantine issues or biosecurity issues that might be associated with the introduction of those new species.

I recall listening to probably an ABC Rural report some time ago about the work of our CSIRO scientists, who were painstakingly taking dung beetles to the southern parts of Western Australia to conduct further experiments on the effectiveness of these breeds. It is slow and arduous work—if I remember well, it was going to take between 10 and 20 years for the scientists to be able to show without doubt that the introduction of these species was having a very positive impact on the fly population in that part of Australia. It is painstaking and very slow work, work for which you have to wait a long time for a return. That is one of the reasons that I pay so much credit to those who are working in this very important area.

I have said in this place many times before—and it is not designed to be a partisan comment, although it probably will be taken as one—that in my view we lack a coherent strategic plan for Australian agriculture. We do have a white paper on its way, and we are assured that it is going to be comprehensive. I suppose Minister Joyce would argue that that will form Australia's strategic plan in agriculture. I am a bit sceptical and not confident that that will be the case. I am not confident, because even the terms of reference for the white paper are not sufficiently broad, in my view, to pick up all of the issues that we need to tackle in terms of our agricultural future or the issues that arise if we really are going to fully capitalise on those opportunities in Asia—the phenomenon I prefer to

call the 'dining boom'. It will stretch all the way from our productivity and the efficient use of our limited natural resources right through to how we make decisions about where those resources should be allocated—where the niche markets are, where the return is going to be, what products use water most efficiently and so on. Here today in this debate we see another aspect. It is may be a relatively small aspect but it is a debate that gives you an idea of how comprehensive those challenges will be. These are things which, going back to where I began, are never at the forefront of the public debate in this country—but should be. There are many more I could name.

I will take a few minutes to talk about messaging in rural Australia and how we promote conversations in rural Australia about these important issues. The medium we rely upon most to activate these discussions in rural and regional Australia is the ABC. It is a very sad period for the ABC because government imposed cuts are now starting to bite very hard on this most important part of the social and economic infrastructure of rural and regional Australia—our local ABC services, in particular ABC Radio. As we speak, in Newcastle, my own region, each and every one of the 33 staff who work at that facility—

Mr Coulton: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker: this motion by my colleague is very important. I suggest the member for Hunter sticks to the subject. A great deal of manure has been discussed so far. I suggest he sticks to the bovine sort and not the other.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Goodenough): That is not a point of order.

Mr FITZGIBBON: I have been respectful to the other side in this discussion. I would expect them to be respectful to me. I have made the link between the discussion before the chamber and the importance of facilitating broader community discussion of these issues. There could be nothing of greater importance to facilitating that discussion than the role the ABC plays. Before I was rudely interrupted, I was saying that up to one-third of those who work at the ABC facility in Newcastle are being pulled in to the general manager's office for a discussion. Sadly, as I understand it, one-third of the staff in Newcastle will not have a job at the end of this day. I hope that is not accurate, but that is the very strong speculation. It makes it a very sad day for me. It makes it a very sad day for everyone living in the Hunter region.

Ms Hall interjecting—

Mr FITZGIBBON: I hear the member for Shortland agreeing with my point. But it is not just the Hunter region; it is filtering through our rural and regional communities right around this country. It is a very sad day and I appeal to the Prime Minister to rethink this issue. *(Time expired)*