



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

BILLS

Appropriation Bill (No. 1) 2012-2013

Consideration in Detail

SPEECH

Wednesday, 30 May 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Burke, Tony, MP

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Mr BURKE (Watson—Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities) (12:51): I would need a good four hours to answer that question. If I miss anything in the time available I would be happy, when we resume, to come back to the question. A few issues have been raised, and I will start with the apples issue which is a classic example that members—in particular of the National Party, less so of the Liberal Party—have to be very careful about what they ask for. If you imagine where we would land if these protectionist demands were met, it would be an absolute disaster for Australian agriculture.

Let's look at the apples issue in order. First, Australian science had the import risk analysis and what we believed were the scientific risks of apple importation from New Zealand. This government held the line on the import risk analysis and found itself being taken to the WTO by New Zealand. As a member of the WTO, we ran the Australian case and we ran it hard, but we lost the case. We ended up with conditions put in place which provided a bar on a number of conditions—for example, if leaf matter were continued within a shipment. Since that time there has been an attempted shipment from New Zealand which was found to contain leaf matter. What happened? It never left New Zealand shores, because the protocols that were put in place after the WTO decision were the strongest we could put in place.

From time to time we get an argument about still stopping them all together. That was pretty implicit in the principles that the member for Riverina put forward. Make no mistake, deciding to rail against WTO rules and say we are going to ignore them means a lot for an industry that relies on 60 per cent of its product being exported: 60 per cent of what we grow we do not sell in this country. We as a nation have more to gain from trade than almost any other agricultural nation in the world. We have large agricultural production and a relatively small population. The risk that is borne by saying that we will rail against WTO rules carries a disastrous outcome for Australia's farmers. It is one thing to say to an apple grower, 'We want to keep these imports out for you and we want to ignore the WTO decision.' But try telling a grain grower that that is the game you want to play; try telling a beef producer that that is the game you want to play; try telling someone who is producing cotton that that is the game you want to play—because what you are saying is: 'We're willing to take a massive risk with our biggest areas of agricultural export.'

This government will not take that risk. We will run the argument of Australian science, and we will run it hard, in front of every international tribunal, but we are not going to abandon the trade opportunities that are in front of us. If we win a case, then we will grab it with both hands; if we do not win it, then we will be a nation that plays by the rules. The alternative is the worst possible outcome for Australian farmers. And, when you have entities that do not play by the rules, let us not forget how that unfolds for Australian farmers.

I was surprised to hear a member of the National Party have the courage to utter the letters 'AWB'—really surprised—because, if you want to know what happens when things go off the rails, what happens when people are not facing competitive pressures and what happens in the worst possible inside-deal scenarios, I reckon that side deals with Saddam Hussein's regime are not a bad example—not a bad example and a real one, one which was only cleaned up because this government came to office. The previous government was willing to see the rorts maintained and see the monopoly and the single desk remain. We now have a situation where farmers get to choose who they sell to. How outrageous is that!