



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Live Animal Exports

SPEECH

Monday, 25 June 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Entsch, Warren, MP

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Mr ENTSCHE (Leichhardt—Chief Opposition Whip) (19:41): In rising to speak on this motion it certainly does not give me any great pleasure at all in having to raise this issue again. If you go back to last year when decisions were made by the minister with regard to live cattle export, the process that was used by the minister and the decisions that he made showed quite clearly that he had no understanding whatsoever of that portion of the industry of which he was charged with the responsibility of representing. As a direct consequence of that, the decisions that he made had a profound negative impact on many producers, large and small, and many of those in my region in Far North Queensland.

I think the minister recognised that he had made some grave mistakes in the way in which he had handled the issue. That manifested itself in that he was prepared to offer a \$25,000 support package to assist those that had been negatively impacted by that decision. We all welcomed the decision that he was prepared to recognise that he had made an error and that that money was going to be made available, certainly not to compensate, but to at least assist those producers, who had been negatively affected, to survive another season and deal with their problems.

I have to say that I received a number of letters at that time. One was from Mary and Vic Inverardi who said that they heard Bos indicus that were suited for the climate in North Queensland and the breed was preferred by the export market—we all know that. In June they sold off steers as a direct result of the live export ban. Because they were worried about their future cash flow, they have now obtained agistment for the steers and heifers that they kept on supplements. Of course, that is an additional cost because they have gone over the weight for the live export because of the delays, and, of course, that is another drain on their resources. It also meant an impact on their natural grasses. This year's weaners that are coming along are now too light for the weight limit and they have to hold them over until next season. That, in itself, basically cuts off the cash flow for the Inverardis.

We had a similar letter from Troy and Erica D'Addona from Lakeland. They had been forced to sell off a large number of their weaner steers. The export ban had prevented them from selling older cattle earlier this year and now they are overstocked and have a shortage of grass. They have had to feed older steers and have had to put some on agistment, again, at significant additional cost.

There were also Kieran and Tracy Lucey from Mount Garnet. They put it even better when they said they were affected by Yasi. They were unable to sell cattle through their normal turnoff period. That put a huge financial pressure on them and they had to extend their overdraft. They then had four decks of cattle booked for the live export boat which was due to leave the week surrounding the export ban. Again, it was another huge financial blow for their business and they were already at their limits in relation to their overdraft. They have had to subsequently have their loan repayments deferred.

These are the sorts of things that are seriously impacting people. I thought at the time that the \$25,000 would assist these people or at least carry them over to the next year. I wrote with all the best of intentions to the minister suggesting that we needed some help in this area. Centrelink had been charged with the responsibility of managing this particular program and that is where the problem lies. These people, the Inverardis, the D'Addonas and the Luceys, were busy fixing up problems. Much of it was associated with damage that was done from cyclone Yasi and they realised they were going to have shortfalls.

They heard in advertisements that they may be entitled to an opportunity in relation to financial assistance, and they all did the same thing—they contacted Centrelink—and that is where the problem was because they were told by Centrelink staff, who like the minister had absolutely no understanding, whatsoever, of the program they were administering that they had no entitlement to. So, they went about their business, disappointed, repairing fences and other damage by cyclone Yasi. It was only later they realised, when they spoke to others outside the district, that they may well have been entitled to that \$25,000. Unfortunately, the time allocated for applying finished in September last year and they were told that they were outside the time frame, even though

on review they were entitled to the payment. It was on that basis I wrote to the minister expressing my concerns and urging him to reconsider his position.

I got a letter back from the minister recently and in that letter he said that he was not going to extend those grants. He also went on to say that his department had provided Centrelink with scripts for use by the Australian government assistance line call centre staff. Clearly, given he did not understand what he was administering, the scripts he provided to Centrelink staff obviously reflected that. They were telling people, who clearly qualified, that they had no entitlement. As he said in his letter, he used mobile servicing units and rural and remote newspapers and community meetings. They circulated facts sheets on the business assistance package to a large number of stakeholders including farming and representative groups. That is true, but the problem was that, when he provided that information, the people who were administering it—the people working at Centrelink—had the script sheets provided by his department and they were wrong. This is no reflection on the Centrelink staff. They were only providing advice on what they were being told.

There were many, many people who missed out on this application. I spoke to AgForce on this matter to see how broad this problem was. The response I got was:

AgForce North regional staff, elected councillors and Cattle Council Australia's northern representatives have received numerous calls from a wide cross section of producers and many in the Yasi impact area, all raised their concerns that Centrelink paperwork for eligibility was very misleading and consequently no applications prepared.

Unfortunately, they go on to say:

The 3 month claim period was far too short considering the state of this region following Yasi,—

it appears that the Northern Territory and Western Australia did not have this same problem over there because they did not have to deal with the impact of cyclone Yasi on top of this. Given the impact it has had in my region in Far North Queensland having a double whammy of Yasi and a minister who does not understand those sections of industry that he is responsible for in his portfolio, providing misleading and ambiguous information to Centrelink call staff which saw many producers—particularly smaller producers, who least could afford to—lose that \$25,000, it is profoundly disappointing that that minister does not at least concede that not only did he make a mistake in the initial decisions in relation to the live export debacle but he also continued to make mistakes which have compounded the problems for these particular individuals. He should open it up to allow those who have been so badly affected by this to give them an opportunity to recover something of the losses that they are continuing to suffer even to this day because of very, very bad decisions by a minister who clearly does not understand much of the portfolio that he is charged with the responsibility of administering. I believe that, in that case, where the minister continues to allow these problems to be ongoing, he should be condemned for the way in which he has handled this whole debacle.