Farm Household Support Amendment (Relief Measures) Bill (No. 1) 2020

Second Reading
Mr JOYCE (New England) (18:58): I'd like to commend the member for Lyons for bringing a whole range of issues into that debate, and I'm trying to work out how I can get my support for a proper legal process surrounding Julian Assange into this debate on the farm household support bill! I'll have to consider that for a while! But I'll get to it.

An honourable member interjecting—

Mr JOYCE: They actually do. The farm household allowance is incredibly important. I was the minister—and there is nothing more ex than an ex! But I was the minister. On the history of this: there was this belief, a consensus, from the Labor Party, but agreed to by the coalition, that droughts were kind of not going to be supported anymore, and that farm household allowance was the final stop and that was it. It was basically a temporary unemployment benefit. Even when I became the minister, that was definitely in the zeitgeist of the department and everywhere else: 'Don't go back into drought policy because we're not going to have a drought policy again.' Luckily, that has changed, and I would suggest it has changed on both sides of the House, which is good.

As to the numbers that were getting farm household allowance at the start when I became the minister, there were 367 in Australia—367. Now we have about 13,000 people getting it, and that has happened because we've streamlined it and we've changed the threshold levels, because there were more than 367 people in Australia who needed it, and we had to make sure that we had a proper process that provided dignity for people in their lives.

You have got to remember—I know you do, Mr Deputy Speaker McVeigh, because you are closely associated, being a former agriculture minister in Queensland—that farmers weren't allowed to get the dole, weren't allowed to get social security, so for them it was destitution when things went bad. They literally had no money—nothing—and they couldn't afford to go to the chemist. They couldn't afford groceries, couldn't afford to put fuel in their car. They lived in absolute destitution, and I found that a complete affront. You always find the poorest in regional areas, especially in the towns that people have forgotten about. Of course, as they went downhill, all the people, like the itinerate labourers who lived in the small villages, suffered as well.

But now the government has changed the process for farm household allowance. I know there are still problems out there. We need to streamline it but we've made huge changes from where it was. I want to commend a few people. I commend the Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, who's part of the McCormack-Morrison government, for making sure he put drought at the top of his agenda, because farm household allowance by itself in its former iteration was not enough, more had to be done and this issue had to be taken seriously. The member for Lyons brought up other issues of assistance to people in regional areas. Because he brought them up, I would like to agree with him on some of them.

He talked about water assets and the proper studies about where water is and where it should go in Tasmania. I would suggest that we take the next step. I've always believed that Australia needs a vision for the movement of water from the wet north, where even now in Townsville they're saying there are areas they won't insure unless they get proper flood mitigation, to the areas where there is no water. This drought in many instances has probably come to a conclusion, with big floods going through Charleville at the moment and through St George. But don't think there is not another drought coming. What we shouldn't be doing now is taking our eyes off the ball. We should be devising a vision of a water scheme for our nation that moves water from the northern rivers between Townsville and Cairns to a dam on the Burdekin, move it into the Flinders, from the Flinders into the Thompson, from the Thompson into the Warrego, from the Warrego into the Darling, from the Darling into the Murray and from the Murray into the Lower Lakes. But it would only get to the Lower Lakes on rare occasions from North Queensland as required. The vast majority of the time, the water collected would be utilised for the economic benefit of the western districts of Queensland, the most approximate area to that. That is something this nation should look at doing as this would also help people on the land.
Twenty-five per cent of bonds that are now issued globally are issued at negative interest rates. If you give them $100, they will give you back $95—negative interest rates—so there is money out there looking for a home. If we created an infrastructure bond scheme, the role of government would be to underwrite the coupon rate—that is, the interest rate return, not the face value of the bond—which would be very low because money is looking for a home, then we would be able to attract the funds to start this process. The guarantee would be paid by people so they could get access to water down the track as the program was built, and that would pay for the interest on the bonds. Then as you were able to deliver the water, they would pay for the licence and then pay for the actual water itself and this would allow us to pay for this scheme, very similar to the Snowy Mountains Corporation and how it built the Snowy Mountains scheme.

I now go back to the Farm Household allowance. These amendments will further streamline this process and give another significant step towards giving people dignity in their lives by keeping groceries on their table, by giving them access to money. We have simplified the assets test. It's now $5.5 million and it's a total of all assets, so I have read. This is important because I go back to so many people who ring up my office and say to them: 'Please, do not self-assess.' People come and tell me they can't get access to farm household allowance. It worries me because I'm saying, 'From what you told me, I think you certainly can.' They say, 'No, I can't.' When I make the inquiries, I find out they have never actually gone for a proper assessment. They have made their own decision.

In so doing, they cut themselves off from access to funds that will not float your boat as far as keeping the farm flush with fuel or paying the lease payments—and they can't; you won't have enough money for that—but they will allow you to have some dignity and make sure that your partner or your wife is not freaking out because there is no prospect of any money coming in and they don't know how on earth they're going to pay the grocery bill or go to the chemist or have any sense of dignity around other people when they can't afford fuel for the car. That's what the farm household allowance is there to do. It's not to finance the farm; it's to keep dignity in the house, especially in a house with kids, in a remote area, which most farms are—vastly more remote, obviously, than people in town.

We also have to look at the other actions we have taken to help people on the land, and I want to give two examples. The Regional Investment Corporation, which was set up by the coalition, with the assistance of Malcolm Turnbull and, to be honest, me, is now being widely utilised for the assistance of people in droughts and bushfires and floods, to give them access to concessional loans. This was something that was disregarded at the start; they said it would have no use. I have to say the Labor Party said that, if they got into government, they'd immediately remove it. I implore them to make a statement that they are not going to do that and that this organisation will continue its role, because it is so vitally important now to so many people on the land. I suppose that's a challenge to the member for Grayndler and the member for Hunter to make a statement that this organisation would be secure if there was a change in government. People need to know that.

The other example, of course, was that we brought forward the Inland Rail to try and broaden the economic base in regional areas, fighting for and achieving close to $10 billion worth of investment so that we could develop the Parkeses, the Narrabris, the Toowoombas—all the towns, basically, between Melbourne and Brisbane on an inland route. Your own seat of Groom, Mr Deputy Speaker McVeigh, will obviously be a huge beneficiary of that capital investment. It's something that so many people have spoken about in the past. They just never did it. It was the great dream—doorstops with people carrying spikes and carrying rails, but never actually building the railway line. It was something that, at the start of this term of the coalition government, we actually fought for and we achieved, and it's great to see it starting to roll out now.

The member for Lyons also brought up net zero emissions. This is not going to be a help to regional Australia; this is going to be an incredible encumbrance—because we've dealt with this. To be quite frank, we've had the experience of having our private assets inflicted on by both sides of government. Vegetation management laws, which were the first iteration to help Australia comply with its international agreements, came off people on the land, because, basically, in collusion with state governments, the federal government met their international agreements by bringing in tree-clearing laws. They said it was for a whole range of reasons, but that it would allow them to meet that carbon equation. But for us on the land—and I'm on the land and we had to deal with it—it meant that we were divested of an asset, an asset that was formally privately owned by me and my family, and it became invested in the state without payment. 'Divesting an individual of a private asset to be vested in the state without payment for the communal ownership' are the words: communism. And we hate it in country areas. We couldn't believe that there was this collusion.
Seeing the Treasurer of Australia at that point in time, Mr Peter Costello, go on the 7.30 Report and say it was his coordination that had brought this about really offended us. It deeply offended us, because we thought that our side of the political fence believed in the primacy of private ownership and private property, not having the government take it. The government can acquire it if it wishes, but that's the word, 'acquire'—pay for it on fair and just terms, not just take it for nothing. We've had to deal with this climate issue, this carbon equation, in the past. So we're well alive to what's coming towards us again.

Then we had the next issue, when, in dealing with the Democrats to get the GST through, we had the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act foisted on us, yet another environmental caveat, another environmental impost, on our capacity to manage our land by reason of an agreement made in this building, by hook or by crook, probably in this chamber. And we've been inflicted with that ever since.

Now we see the next statement—that we're going to go to zero carbon emissions by 2050. That means that some people will increase their carbon emissions, but it has to be paid for by someone for this equation to equal zero. We know where that will be; it will be rural Australia. It will be people on the land. They will pay for it. They're the ones who won't be allowed to manage the vegetation. They'll be the ones who have to have trees grow on their place to make this equation work. One of the gentlemen from some environment unit at ANU—part of the Crawford School of Public Policy—was saying we have to let shrubs grow back on marginal land! Just the terminology 'shrubs' means he probably doesn't know what he's talking about, and he probably doesn't know what that actual effect is. It sounds like something from Monty Python—a 'shrubbery'!

Mr Wallace: A shrubbery!

Mr JOYCE: A shrubbery! It worries us, because we see this coming down. I was having my discussion with the member for Hunter at that so-called press conference the other day, which he decided to crash. He said that we can fix the methane emissions from cattle by some magical process. I tell you what the IPCC have said in their latest meeting in Korea—that they're going to do it by a global reduction in the cattle herd. That's us again. It'll be inflicted on us. I know how they'll do it. They'll have a licence agreement of how many cattle you can run on your place. They won't be taking the load off you; they'll just have a licence agreement, and you'll have to comply with that licence and over time that licence be will be reduced. That will be yet another infliction on regional people on our capacity to carry on our life to get ahead, for money for our communities, for money for people in the weatherboard and iron house, because we've seen this movie before. We know where it ends up. That is why it's so important that we put down a marker, quite clearly, and say: 'Not on. Just not on. We're not doing this, because it's not merely our concern for what might happen in the future, it's our very clear memory of what has happened in the past.'

The farm household allowance is a good idea. Net zero emissions is another infliction on our rights, our property rights and income rights, in regional Australia, which we will fight tooth and claw against. The Regional Investment Corporation is something that everyone poo-pooped and thought was ridiculous, and now we've created it. We need the Labor Party to come out, even now, and say they support it and that they won't get rid of it after the next election. Inland Rail is a massive investment that's going to be hugely important. And for water security—and I'll close on this—as a nation let's start on a nation-building project: the movement of water from the wet areas of the tropics to the parched areas of the south.