



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Federation Chamber**

**ADJOURNMENT**

**Trade with China**

**SPEECH**

**Thursday, 25 September 2014**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

**Date** Thursday, 25 September 2014  
**Page** 10707  
**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Fitzgibbon, Joel, MP

**Source** House  
**Proof** No  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Mr FITZGIBBON** (Hunter) (12:46): The Minister for Agriculture and I have each said on a number of occasions, very publicly, that we would like to keep the politics out of the sector and the portfolio and work as best we can to progress and promote the sector in a cooperative way. I know he means it, and I mean it too.

Agriculture in this country has such an opportunity ahead of it for many reasons but largely because of what is taking place in China: a huge growth in population and, in particular, a huge growth in the middle classes. There are hundreds of millions of people looking for higher quality, safe, clean, green food, something that this country is very, very well placed to provide. I call it the dining boom. Some call it the food boom; some use the misnomer Asian food bowl, which is something else the minister and I agree upon. It is a phrase we do not use. Whatever you want to call it, it will not come to us. We do have competition. The advantages provided by our geographical location are limited because of the level of our competitiveness in other areas. It will not come to us; we have to go after it. It will not be so much about volumes for this country, although volumes will increase; it will be about value and higher returns on our investment—in other words, directing our limited natural resources to the commodities that provide the greatest return for the country. We see the best example of that at the moment in dairy, where the Chinese are paying extraordinary amounts of money for our fresh milk because, particularly in the wake of the baby formula scare there, they are looking for a safe product and a quality product, and we can certainly provide that.

However, if we are going to reach our full potential, we will need the government to be involved. The industry will need strategic guidance from government. Our success will mainly be determined by the private sector and, in particular, the level of foreign investment we can attract to this country to build infrastructure, but government has a role to play. It needs to be careful with its regulatory regimes; it has to get the tax system right; it has to get our spend on R&D at the right levels et cetera; but strategic guidance, particularly around natural resource sustainability, will be important.

This is where I get concerned. The government promised a new agricultural white paper. It said it would have it in place 12 months after coming into office. Of course, we are now well past that date. It indicated there would be a green paper ahead of the white paper by the middle of this year and, of course, that green paper has not yet manifested.

I was always concerned that 12 months of policy inertia was too much. I am now concerned that we are going to have much more than 12 months, and that is too long a period for the sector to be waiting for a range of government positions, processes and guidance to come to fruition.

I urge the minister—I would rather he get it right than in early, but there are many in the sector—an overwhelming number of people—just waiting to better understand where the government intends to take the sector.

I cannot help but be critical that that process has been slow. I would not be doing my job if from time to time I was not critical of the government, if I thought they were getting it wrong and, as I thought they were getting it wrong just last week—last Friday—on their announcement of the regulation of the country's bulk wheat ports.

Let's hope that the white paper delivers the right strategic guidance. I can be critical of all parties in this place for not doing sufficient in the past, although the former Labor government did provide a number of papers, including the National Food Plan, the Asian century white paper and a very in-depth paper on the relationship between Australian and Chinese agriculture, but much more needs to be done.

Very quickly, I want to congratulate Pip Job for her success at the rural women's awards last night. She is now Australian Rural Woman of the Year. Jackie Jarvis from Western Australia, who was the runner-up, and Pip Job from New South Wales are both outstanding women.

I point out that Pip Job appealed to governments plural to get more money into Landcare, another area where I am afraid I cannot be bipartisan. We are devastated and the sector is devastated by the government's cuts to Landcare, and I call on the government to reflect on that decision and to reconsider it.