



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Testing and Labelling of Food Imports

SPEECH

Monday, 2 March 2015

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Laming, Andrew, MP

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Mr LAMING (Bowman) (13:08): What a spray! The member just managed to attack foreign interests, corporate greed and free trade agreements all in the one brushstroke and all over this single case of contaminated berries. Coming from a place like Capricornia, Madam Deputy Speaker, you would know just how important it is to be promoting both the consumption and the growing of local products. But this is not quite so simple. This is about a platform that is ultimately about promoting trade and cooperation between nations—that growing trade has been of benefit for all nations—but also understanding that you have to be able to have a certain level of surveillance for safety.

Through listening very carefully and picking through the rhetoric, I did pick up some suggestions from the opposition speaker: test more foods more often, have more audits and, where possible, use some new technology. You really have to ask a group like FSANZ and the Department of Agriculture exactly what is going to be productive and effective. It is okay to say that only five per cent of consignments are tested—but that is not five per cent of all packets of frozen berries, don't forget. It is very hard to test an entire chunk of frozen berries and be able to say that there is no hepatitis A anywhere in that chunk of frozen berries. There is probably a couple of contaminated droplets in there with no guarantee you will find it.

Most of this testing is on residue products, which can be seen through an entire consignment. It is far more uncertain trying to find hepatitis A. So before we mislead anyone, there have been no more cases of hepatitis A so far this year than in any other year. We are not facing a tsunami of nasty hepatitis A, spirited in here by some foreign country that needs to be pushed back. We need to have a little bit more of an understanding of where risks are, and respond accordingly.

So, before we impugn FSANZ, who simply work out the appropriate recommendations, and before we drag in staff changes to FSANZ as being the cause of the hepatitis disaster—which of course it is not; and I see the opposition speaker now waving her hands from side to side saying that she was not suggesting that—let us remember that they simply make the expert guidelines upon which the Department of Agriculture and others carry out the tests. So it is not just FSANZ that should be picked on here. If you talk to FSANZ, they will say to you, 'In these areas we do not see the staffing changes as in any way affecting the ability to make our recommendations. Recommendations are taken, ultimately, by Agriculture, who carry them out.'

There is, of course, the bigger picture that is very popular—and that is talking about better country-of-origin labelling and more information for customers. I am sure on that point we can start to agree, because it is less of a hysterical reaction to what happened over the last month.

I note, also, that the one single case here in the ACT is a good friend of ours, Mr Callum Denness, who actually works in this building. We wish him well in his recovery from what is potentially—putatively—related to the berry incident. That is very close to home for many of us who work in this building. I think it is important not to get carried away by this immediate reaction to blame other countries and the poor quality of their imports. Ultimately we are tied, through very productive and successful free trade agreements that give both countries in this bilateral arrangement a lot of advantages, and through WTO obligations. Those obligations say that we should not, for the purpose of nationalism, ever be running interference on a foreign product simply because it is from overseas. So let us understand that instead of just reacting and saying, 'Start testing every packet of berries'—and there was a real hint of that in what the opposition speaker was saying—we need also to realise that if standards fall and there is a genuine health risk, there is every opportunity under current law to prosecute that particular issue. If health standards are at risk you can take action—and this is a perfect example of where that can occur.

When it comes to where our food comes from, there is some level of agreement. I think it is utterly inadequate that you can just say the word 'imported' and that customers do not deserve to know where from. I sense that that will be an area of progress. Over the previous one- or two-year period the rolling average of how much foreign

content appears in a mixed food should be the subject of labelling on a packet. If you have room on a packet to say 'imported', you have room to list the largest three providers of that imported component of your product—whether it is above or below 50 per cent. There is general agreement that just flipping 'imported' and 'local' once it tips over 50 per cent is also inadequate.

I just leave this debate today by saying that ultimately giving people 20/20 vision, incredible foresight and a PhD in food science is never going to lead every Australian to read packages and labels. We keep squeezing these food manufacturers for the entire Wikipedia to be printed on the back—and sometimes the front—of products. In the end, Australians want to know, in every area—given that only 15 per cent of what is on the shelves of supermarkets comes from Australia—right at the margins, what are the producers that have a greater propensity to use Australian products, when there is a choice to do so. In the end perhaps we need something simpler, which is to identify, in categories where there is an Australian component, those companies using the most Australian product in their class. That will be a very productive and fertile area, and one which I am sure both sides can agree on.