



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Federation Chamber**

**BILLS**

**Appropriation Bill (No. 3) 2011-2012,  
Appropriation Bill (No. 4) 2011-2012**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 27 February 2012**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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**Speaker** Cobb, John, MP

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**Mr JOHN COBB** (Calare) (17:43): In speaking on appropriation bills Nos 3 and 4, I want to concentrate on the need for agricultural skills now and particularly in the future. Two weeks ago we learnt that the University of Western Sydney will, for the first time in 100 years, no longer offer a degree in agriculture at its Hawkesbury campus. With fewer than 10 enrolments for 2012, the course is not viable and the university has been forced to suspend it. According to reports, the number of campuses offering degrees in agriculture in 1989 was 23 and the number now, I believe, is around nine or possibly 10. Further investigations have also revealed that fewer than 700 agricultural science students will graduate nationally this year. The amazing thing is that every one of them can get a job whether through corporate agriculture, commercial positions in agribusiness or working for government. Mind you, governments, particularly state governments, are employing fewer and fewer people. This government actually cut its graduate program at one point—until public outcry forced them to stop that.

We need agricultural scientists. We need researchers from the point of view of biosecurity and quarantine. There is nothing agriculture needs in the future so much as those people with the ability to scientifically protect it or have the knowledge and the experience to scientifically protect it from the biosecurity angle. This is for two reasons. One, the greatest selling point that Australian agriculture has is our virtual disease-free situation. We are lucky enough to be the world's largest island continent. But it is not just that. It is also because we need to protect ourselves from those things which enter the country as well as those things which leave it.

The only thing that has kept agriculture out there over the last 40 to 50 years has been the increases in productivity it is able to generate. Up until about eight or nine years ago it had an annual growth rate of something over three per cent, which is phenomenal and probably greater than anything any of the developed nations of the world have ever had. In the last few years it has plateaued out, not just because of drought. In recent times we have had a far greater influx of bio-issues for our departments to worry about. The truth is that state governments have to a large extent abdicated their responsibility. More and more this is an issue that the federal government has to deal with—but not this one. It is not dealing with it.

Degrees and courses in agriculture are imperative, particularly in research. We have to start encouraging this, whether through scholarships or whatever it might be. We have to work with industry to increase the number of people doing ag science and postgraduate research. There is a lot a federal government can do with the state governments. We have to get them back in the game. However, this does seem increasingly unlikely with the current federal government's inherent ignorance of all things agricultural. I hesitate to say that they have a down on agriculture. I think it is just total carelessness. Their knowledge of things commercial and things which agriculture actually needs is quite staggering. Some of them are so careless you would think that they could not do it on purpose—it is just ignorance. But the list is growing—biosecurity incursions which have not been dealt with, myrtle rust and the Asian honeybee. There is a lack of transparency on foreign ownership. And, on the live cattle ban, not one action taken by this government has frightened Australian business, be it corporate or small business—they could sell razor blades, face creams or steel—like the overnight ban on the live trade to Indonesia, without talking to the customers. If they can do that to something which cannot be stuck on the shelf for six months until it is convenient to sell, what the heck would they do to something that can be stuck on the shelf for six months? Not one action frightened Australian business so much as that, let alone the offhand way in which they dealt with the country in question.

The passing of the carbon tax—I do not know whether it is ignorance or whether they realise what they are doing—will have a greater effect on agriculture than on almost any other business, even though they say we are not involved in it. Everything we do is involved with the carbon tax effect—it is on everything we buy or transport or whatever. Also, the comments by both the current minister and the previous minister about how the milk price war would not do any harm to anyone and was good for consumers show total and careless ignorance about how the market system works and how dairy farmers are affected by this, and dairy farmers will be very much affected by the carbon tax.

The Murray-Darling Basin Plan failed to deliver an environmental water plan that shows how they will achieve the environmental outcomes. They have decided they have to take all this water from productive outcomes.

You may say, 'By God, that must have taken a while,' but it took just 12 months for all those things to happen. Two weeks ago we learnt that the department had changed its mission statement. The mission statement used to say the things you would expect a specific department within government to do: talk about agriculture, its needs, its aspirations, its need for trade, its need for good practices et cetera. Now it says:

We work to sustain the way of life and prosperity of all Australians.

Well, hooray, that is what every government should say. But for a specific department to remove any reference to its reason for existence does make you wonder.

What hope does agriculture have when even the government and a specialised department are turning their backs on it, are totally deaf to its needs and are not even aware that that is what they are doing? Agriculture in Australia drives \$155 billion a year in economic production. It is over 12 per cent of the GDP. We might not ride on the back of it any more, but by heavens we contribute to it. It generates around 1.6 million Australian jobs and \$32 billion a year in exports. That is in farm exports. They are creating—along with the small business sector in Australia, in particular—a genuine lack of confidence.

This is terribly sad because this should be a challenging and exciting time for agriculture. In the last 8 years particularly, the UN and everyone else truthfully says that commodity and agriculture prices have risen. It is not because we have gone from six billion to seven billion in 11 years. That is part of the reason, but it is not the big reason. They are not saying the future is great because they are talking about nine billion in the next 20 or 30 years or so. They may be reasons. But the real reason is that in the past 20 years our nearest neighbours, Asia and South-East Asia, have developed a very significant improvement in lifestyle by middle income earners, whether it is Indonesia, China, India or whatever. Previously, when we have had a lift out of Asia it was caused by Japan or Korea. The actual lift in possible market gain by China, India and Indonesia is probably something like 15 times as strong as what is already happening in Japan and Korea. It is not because of the size of the populations. It is because they are getting used to the meat that we—

*A division having been called in the House of Representatives—*

**Sitting suspended from 17:54 to 18:02**

**Mr JOHN COBB:** Government rolls on. I think that in the Australian Year of the Farmer—and I hope this current government, with its renewed Prime Minister, as it were, can start to grasp that this is the Australian Year of the Farmer—the whole of Australia does not need to worship farmers, or try to set farmers on a pedestal, because they do not want that. But agriculture does need the people of Australia to realise that it is not just a matter of going out there, putting something in the ground and, by and by, selling it. It is enormously difficult to be a farmer, having to meet what our nation deserves and expects in the name of quality, in the name of biosecurity, in the name of food safety, in the name of productivity. We do need an agricultural sector that can continue not just to meet our expectations. The fact is that we set a benchmark in the world's exports not just for quality and not just for our products being virtually disease free. The fact is that, while we are nowhere near one of the world's biggest producers, we are number 4 in the world's largest exporters of agricultural commodities. That is because we are only 20-odd million people but we grow three or four times as much as we need ourselves. We are not in any way, shape or form going to run out of food, but we have to make sure we continue to produce what we do. We need to set a benchmark around the world so that those with the necessary degrees, with the necessary research capabilities and with the necessary abilities can continue to help farmers grow more with the same or less moisture on the same soil as they had before. We can only do this if we have not fewer graduates from university but more.

One of the great things that corporate agriculture does in Australia is employ a lot of these people. The family farms perfect what the larger corporations do, but we still need those with the resources to try them. They also employ those who have the ability to come up with new products and new ideas.

This government must be cognisant of the fact that it has totally ignored—as much carelessly as deliberately—the needs of agriculture. In the three years that I have been responsible in the coalition for agriculture, I think I have had the head of every faculty in Australia that has run an agricultural course say to me that they need more

encouragement, particularly from the federal government, including encouragement for young people to enter agricultural science and the like through the universities and further education that Australia has to offer.

Agriculture has an enormous amount to offer the country and the world, but it needs the right people in the right place to do it. It needs this government to act. We are committed to encouraging students and encouraging R&D. This government has cut the personnel involved with biosecurity and quarantine. It has cut the money available. It has taken out a whole department from the area. This is incredibly dangerous. Nothing makes me as nervous as this government's attitude to quarantine and biosecurity. *(Time expired)*