



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Federation Chamber**

**PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS**

**Australian Year of the Farmer**

**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) (18:48): I rise to speak about the Australian Year of the Farmer and I take great pleasure and honour from commending my colleague Bruce Scott for introducing this motion, which I support. Bruce, like me, comes from a region which has a long history and is a very agricultural area. Calare is actually far older than Maranoa. The electorate of Calare is the first place that Wentworth, Lawson and Blaxland found when they headed over the hills from Sydney. It is probably the oldest place where mining and agriculture began in a serious way in Australia.

**Mr Adams:** Tasmania!

**Mr JOHN COBB:** Tasmania got other things that we will not talk about right now. This is not only some of the most magnificent country in Australia but also one of the earliest places of European settlement in Australia—the oldest place outside the Sydney basin. It has some of the most magnificent farming land in Australia, be it broadacre, horticulture, fruit and vegetables, cropping or, particularly, sheep and cattle. It is the most magnificent grazing country I think I have ever seen in our fair land.

**Mr Adams:** Have you been to Tasmania?

**Mr JOHN COBB:** I love Tasmania—after Calare. It is high time that farming had its year. While I know Australia loves its farmers and understands that without them there would be nothing to eat and far less to wear, few appreciate what is involved in creating those products. Farmers often deal with mother nature—we deal with her wrath. We think of that in terms of drought but, as we have seen in the last couple of years, mother nature can be pretty savage at the end of a great season and bring frost, hail or too much of a good thing at a time when we are about to strip.

Farmers deal with these issues, whether drought or the absolute devastation of seeing something that you have waited years to grow come to grief. They understand and face the challenges that their industry offers. The last thing agriculture needs is a myriad of totally impractical regulations from local, state and federal governments—particularly from governments which are mistakenly of the belief that they are going to solve the environmental problems of the world. Often these things are going to do little to improve the environment. Having had to travel to Brazil and the US at the time of the BSE crisis, I can tell you that farmers in Australia, Brazil and the USA—and I suspect in most parts of the world—are far more worried about a government's reaction to environmental issues, whether climate change or anything else, than they are about the issues themselves.

Emissions are an example. Climate change scientists and politicians love pointing at agriculture. They see it as the scapegoat and also as the solution, while ignoring the fact that the worst pollution is produced in the world's major cities. A classic example of this is Labor's carbon tax. In their wisdom, the government imposed a threshold. The inclusion of business-size triggers in the carbon tax essentially penalise the largest emitters. However, agriculture's largest emitters such as dairy factories and abattoirs have already scaled up production and made efficiencies in their use of energy, whether gas or electricity, which means that they have already lowered their emissions per tonne of beef processed or whatever probably as much as they reasonably can. The government's legislation means that businesses will now have a disincentive to increase efficiencies. They will simply move to smaller operations and greater emissions per unit of production, with the net result actually being higher. This government is creating a cliff face. Once businesses hit 25,000 tonnes of emissions they are suddenly hit with a kind of tax none of us ever dreamt of. Anyone around that figure, or maybe even up to 30 per cent, is going to say, 'I think maybe we will take a day off a fortnight or a day off a week. It won't be in the interests of lowering carbon emissions but it will certainly save us a heck of a lot of money'.

Another example of ludicrous government policy—and I mention this because agriculture has enough to deal with without bureaucracies and governments making it harder—is that, while heavy road vehicles have an exemption from the carbon tax, rail freight does not. This will be a \$20 million impost on the rail industry, forcing more

freight such as grain onto country roads and decimating them. The fallout from this ridiculous government policy is enormous but Labor does not seem to get it.

Farming, like most businesses, is increasingly based on large production with small and variable margins. For the last 50 years, broadacre farming in particular has kept its head above water by increased productivity, but this has flattened out. The coalition is continuing to push the government to increase its contribution to agricultural research and development to revitalise the industry, to give it every advantage and improve productivity. However, Labor most definitely has not given up but has simply never faced up to it, with the agriculture minister recently telling Japan that Australia has little chance of increasing agricultural productivity. I cannot believe an agriculture minister in Australia would say that. For my whole life I have heard that the world's increasing population will make farmers more prosperous. Recently, the emergence of Asia has heightened this expectation—by recently, we mean in the last 30 years or so. The truth is that the emerging middle class in Asia is certainly having an incremental effect. But despite the hype, farmers recognise there is no overnight transformation.

There will always be challenges for the sector, particularly from global trends. However, poor government policy seen throughout 2011—the carbon tax, the way live exports were dealt with, the basin plan, inadequate biosecurity, foreign ownership and food labelling arrangements—continued to put agriculture on the back foot. The shortage of graduates and skilled workers in the agriculture sector is a function of this Labor government's failure to stand up for this sector. Productivity and innovation are central to profitability. Unless we continually get renewal in the sector and keen, fresh new minds applying new ideas, we will not keep up that productivity which has kept Australian agriculture where it is. This needs to be supported by a government willing to stand up for it. The malaise is so bad in the current government that the agriculture department has removed agriculture from its primary mission statement, and is now:

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

That should be a government mission statement, not a specific department within it. Labor's indifference to agriculture is trashing the agricultural brand, undermining the industry, and is our nation's biggest threat to food security.

The 2012 Year of the Farmer is a chance for the agricultural sector to explain the need for government to help with research and development, to educate researchers, agronomists and rural scientists towards increasing efficiency and productivity, and to have people with the ability to look after Australia's biosecurity and quarantine. We absolutely must have those people.

In 2012, we the coalition will continue to support policies that give better outcomes, such as reviewing the competition and consumer laws. We also plan to finalise the development of our policies on coal seam gas, food labelling and foreign ownership to make sure our farming communities indeed get a fair go. Let us hope that all Australians urge every level of government to realise the need for practical solutions in agriculture. However, at this point in time only the Gillard government can remove its blind spot on agriculture and take the lead by using 2012—the Year of the Farmer—to be proactive and adopt policies that support rather than hinder our farmers. During the global financial crisis, it was not mining but our farming economy that at the end of the day stopped us going into an official recession.

Agricultural production in this country drives \$155 billion a year in economic production. That is still, in this day and age, over 12 per cent of GDP. There are over 1.6 million jobs involved, and exports in agricultural are \$32 billion plus a year. I believe the Australian Year of the Farmer can be a rallying point to explain to mainstream Australia the realities confronting their— (*Time expired*)