THE SENATE

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FORESTRY LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL (No. 1) 1998

TELECOMMUNICATIONS AMENDMENT BILL (NO. 2) 1998

1998 BUDGET MEASURES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (SOCIAL SECURITY AND VETERANS' ENTITLEMENTS) BILL 1998

Second Reading

SPEECH

Thursday, 26 November 1998

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE
Senator IAN CAMPBELL (WA) (10.24 am)—I move:

That these bills be now read a second time.

I seek leave to have the second reading speeches incorporated in Hansard.

Leave granted.

The speeches read as follows—

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FORESTRY LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL (No. 1) 1998

The purpose of this bill is to repeal the Dried Vine Fruits Equalization Act 1978 and amend the Pig Industry Act 1986.

The repeal of the Dried Vine Fruits Equalization Act 1978 will cease the current equalization of export returns for dried vine fruits from 1 January 1999. As equalization currently occurs over the course of a season, with returns calculated at the last export of fruit from that season, the repeal allows for the continued operation of equalization for the previous (1998) season.

The dried vine fruits industry is the only commodity which continues to operate an equalization scheme. The industry now contends that, in the prevailing market circumstances, equalization arrangements are inappropriate, and mask market signals and inhibit industry and marketing innovation. The industry peak body, the Australian Dried Fruits Association has requested the termination of the scheme.

The purpose of the amendments to the Pig Industry Act 1986 is to replace reference to the former National Meat Processors' Association in the act with reference to the Australian Food Council's Processed Meats Forum, which is now the meat processors' representative body.

The bill provides for a nominee of the Australian Food Council's Processed Meats Forum to be nominated to the selection committee for the Australian Pork Corporation; and for the Australian Food Council Processed Meats Forum to be defined as an "eligible industry body", in lieu of the disbanded National Meat Processors' Association.

In October 1997, the National Meat Processors' Association agreed to disband, with all functions and future deliberations on issues affecting the processed meats industry being dealt with by the "Australian Food Council Processed Meats Forum".

The amendment will allow the establishment of a new Australian Pork Corporation Selection Committee comprised of a presiding member, two members from the Pork Council of Australia, and one member from the Australian Food Council Processed Meats Forum.

Once validly constituted, the Australian Pork Corporation Selection Committee can exercise its powers in nominating persons to fill vacancies on the Australian Pork Corporation board.

The amendments will also allow for the Australian Food Council Processed Meats Forum to be defined as an "eligible industry body", thereby obliging the Australian Pork Corporation to consult with the forum before approaching the Minister on issues relating to the making of regulations, prescribing levy amounts, formulating or revising a corporate plan or annual operational plan, and the appointment of the Australian Pork Corporation company auditor.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS AMENDMENT BILL (No. 2) 1998
The Telecommunications Amendment Bill (No. 2) 1998 amends paragraph (1)(a) of Clause 55 of Schedule 3 of the Telecommunications Act 1997 to extend the current sunset provision to 2001.

Clause 55 currently imposes a requirement for telecommunication carriers to notify the Commonwealth where an activity may affect a matter of Commonwealth environmental interest. This is to ensure that the Commonwealth has the ability to intervene in matters of national environmental significance.

In addition, in the absence of clause 55, Telstra, as a Commonwealth body, would be subject to an additional level of environmental regulation through the Environmental Protection (Impact of Proposals) Act 1974 and the Australian Heritage Commission Act 1975, acts which do not cover the other telecommunication carriers.

The clause ceases to apply after 1 January 1999. At the time the Telecommunications Act 1997 was introduced it was planned to have similar arrangements in place through the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Bill 1998. Delays in introducing that bill due to the complexity of drafting involved now means that from 1 January 1999 the telecommunications carriers will no longer be under an obligation to satisfy the Environmental Secretary (the Secretary to the Department of Environment and Heritage) about activities they propose to undertake which have an environmental significance. The Commonwealth will have no powers to regulate relevant matters of Commonwealth environmental interest.

The current bill therefore proposes that the Telecommunications Act 1997 be amended to provide for the environmental impact requirements placed on carriers proposing to install facilities prior to 1 January 1999 to extend beyond that date. The need for the current clause will then be reviewed in the context of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Bill 1998 and related bills.

1998 BUDGET MEASURES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (SOCIAL SECURITY AND VETERANS' ENTITLEMENTS) BILL 1998

Madam President, this bill gives effect to a number of measures announced in the Government's 1998 Budget that will assist in more effective and efficient social security administration.

First, more assistance will be provided to self funded retirees through the extension of the seniors health card. This will be achieved by simplifying the application process and by applying more generous income limits. The income test that applies to the seniors health card will, in future, be based on taxable income. Retirees will, in most cases, be able to demonstrate their taxable income by simply providing their latest income tax assessment notice. In addition, the present income levels will be almost doubled, from $21,320 to $40,000 for a single person, and from $35,620 to $67,000 for a couple. It is estimated that 222,000 retirees will benefit from this measure.

Madam President, the sharer's rule relating to rent assistance was introduced in the 1996 Budget in recognition of the fact that people who live in shared or group accommodation derive economies of scale from that arrangement. The rule operates by reducing the maximum rate of rent assistance payable for single people, without dependent children, who share accommodation to two thirds of that payable to non-sharing single people.

As part of its 1998 Budget, the Government announced that recipients of rent assistance who are lodging in commercial board and lodging type accommodation would be exempted from the operation of the sharer's rule. The exemption recognises that people living in this type of accommodation are in a different situation from those who share accommodation in private residential group houses. This bill gives effect to that announcement and is estimated to benefit 12,000 recipients.

Madam President, two further measures announced in the 1998 Budget and dealt with in this bill illustrate the Government's recognition of the important role played by foster carers in helping young people.

From 1 July 1999, a health care card will be issued to the fostered child of carers who receive family allowance at less than the maximum rate in respect of the child, provided that the foster child was eligible for a pensioner concession card or a health care card as a member of their original family. This measure will benefit the carers of approximately 4,400 foster children.

Further, from 1 September 1999, the 12-month waiting period for parenting payment for single foster carers will be removed, benefiting around 900 single foster carers.

Madam President, I commend the bill to the Senate.
Ordered that further consideration of the second reading speech of this bill be adjourned till fourteen days after today, in accordance with standing order 111.

Ordered that these bills be listed on the Notice Paper as separate orders of the day.