THE SENATE

FARM HOUSEHOLD SUPPORT AMENDMENT (ADDITIONAL DROUGHT ASSISTANCE MEASURES) BILL 2008

Second Reading

SPEECH

Thursday, 19 June 2008

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE
Senator IAN MACDONALD (Queensland) (1.47 pm)—The Farm Household Support Amendment (Additional Drought Assistance Measures) Bill 2008 increases the maximum allowable income exception for the exceptional circumstances relief payments. It extends this support to more small business operators and allows farmers to continue to receive exceptional circumstances relief payment while absent from Australia for specific family or humanitarian purposes.

This is a bill which brings into effect changes announced to the exceptional circumstances relief payments in September 2007 by the former government. These changes were supported by the then opposition, now the government, and so we are all in wild agreement about this particular bill. The bill, interestingly, does provide for a validation of payments made between the announcement on 25 September 2007 and the date this bill actually receives royal assent. Senators know the exceptional circumstances payments provide a targeted safety net income support to farmers in regions experiencing severe and prolonged downturns in income due to rare and severe events—typically, climatic events such as the current drought. It also provides similar assistance to small business dependent upon farmers’ enterprises for 70 per cent or more of their gross business turnover. Extension of this support recognises the particularly severe and prolonged drought that has extended across much of Australia since 2008.

The bill contains a number of provisions, all of which try to mitigate in ways that are humanly possible the exceptional difficulties experienced by people on the land in drought affected areas at the current time. Whilst many Australians wrongly believe the drought has broken, there are many parts of Australia where people on the land and in communities supported by those on the land are doing it really tough. Just last week, the Mount Isa- Cloncurry area of my home state of Queensland was announced as being a drought affected area for the exceptional circumstances period. So the drought continues on.

It is difficult for words to convey some of the problems being experienced by those who have had years and years of prolonged drought. As my colleague Senator Heffernan, who is not in the parliament today, often says, the number of rural suicides in recent times bears a direct relationship to the severity and extent of the drought. The coalition supports its own bill in effect and is pleased that the current government has supported it, as I mentioned, in opposition and has brought this bill forward so that additional relief and additional provisions may be made for those who are impacted upon by this horrible drought.