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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

MOTIONS

Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Industries

SPEECH

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Senator NASH (New South Wales—Deputy Leader of The Nationals in the Senate) (17:00): I rise this evening to make some remarks regarding the government's abject failure to support Australia's agriculture, fisheries and forestry industries. It is not only a failure to support. The government is actively undermining the future sustainability of primary industries. We saw this afternoon a minister—Senator Ludwig—in answer to a Dorothy Dixer on agriculture show his complete incompetence when it comes to rural Australia and agricultural issues. Indeed, he was simply making a joke in a lot of instances within his answer.

Senator Kim Carr interjecting—

Senator NASH: I note Senator Carr is already rising to the bait and making a contribution. I think I am about a minute into my remarks and Senator Carr simply cannot help himself. It was extraordinary watching the minister over there. I was thinking to myself, well, if I talk to the hand it is actually going to give me more information than the minister is and it is actually going to give me more care for rural Australia than the minister is. The minister this afternoon was trying to throw barbs at the National Party which sort of came across like wet fish indicating that the Nationals were pining for the single desk. Well, I will absolutely say on record I am pining for the single desk for wheat. I think getting rid of the single desk for wheat was one of the most stupid decisions a government has ever made and to just philosophically go down the line of deregulation for deregulation's sake was just simply stupid. I say that in the light of now we have growers who are not being paid for wheat they have sold because there is no certainty underpinning that payment for them in many of these instances and that is wrong and that is as a direct result of the deregulation of the wheat industry in many instances.

I come back to the subject at hand. I do note that, in 2011-12, the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry spent nearly \$80,000 on consultants. I am sure people would be very interested to know that part of that funding went towards the department altering its mission statement. So what did the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry actually do as a result of spending all this money? They remove the word 'agriculture' from their mission statement. So it went from

Increasing the profitability, competitiveness and sustainability of Australia's agriculture, fisheries, food and forestry industries—

to—

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

I hope they did not spend the entire \$80,000 on determining that change which shows completely the government's abject failure to support agriculture in this nation.

How on earth can a minister preside over a department for agriculture and tick off the fact that they are taking the word 'agriculture' out of their mission statement? How stupid is that? Does it show the minister's complete disconnect from what is important, right at that position at the top of the department, with a mission statement outlining their mission? It is no wonder at all that people in regional communities are despairing of this Labor. We only have to look at the funding cuts to see that it is truly an abject failure on the part of this government when it comes to agriculture and the primary industries.

Funding to agriculture and the communities that agriculture supports under this government has been slashed from \$3.8 billion to \$1.7 billion. What kind of support does that show to our agricultural communities? What kind of support does that show to the people out there in the regions when this government is presiding over budget cuts at probably the time that regional Australia needs the support most. It simply does not make sense.

We need to turn no further than the issue of water management in the Murray-Darling Basin to see that it is an absolute abject failure of this government to support agriculture. In so many areas it just shows the government's complete lack of understanding of the impact of permanently removing water from those regional communities.

Senator Sterle interjecting—

Senator NASH: I hear across the chamber my colleague Senator Sterle sighing and shaking his head and tisking. I can only assume that the senator's shaking of the head and the sighing and the tisking is in complete relation to something else because I know that Senator Sterle knows how important regional communities are. I am sure he would join with me on many an occasion—not that he would say this—knowing that the government should be doing more and some of the things that the government is doing when it comes to regional Australia should simply not be happening. I do have to say I have the greatest respect for Senator Sterle. I have worked with him for a very long time now on our rural and regional Senate committee. I have great respect for him and I do know that he does care. It is just a shame he does not have a little more influence on his minister when it comes to the decisions that the minister is making.

When we look at water management in the Murray-Darling Basin, the fact that the government has failed completely to properly take into account the social and economic impacts of removing water from the communities is absolutely unacceptable. The government does not even understand, when we have not even got the Murray-Darling Basin Plan finalised yet, that the decisions that have been made, and even those that are going to be made, are having an impact now. That is before the plan is even finalised, before the legislation—and goodness knows when that is going to happen and how and why—has even gone through this chamber. We see a lack of certainty and a lack of confidence out there in the communities in places like Griffith. There is a real lack of confidence in the future of that particular community and that is really sad because Griffith has a fantastic future, as do the rest of our rural communities. But when we see house prices falling and businesses not changing hands in towns like Griffith simply because of the uncertainty that is being created by this government, it is no wonder that people out there are saying that is unacceptable.

There are no two ways about it: the government simply have not placed the same weighting on the social and economic impacts of permanently removing water from those towns as they have placed on the environmental impact. That is simply wrong. It has to be a triple bottom line approach and those three key areas have to be addressed equally. On that, I noticed the other day, when we were debating the bill on small pelagics and the supertrawler, that the Greens were calling for the social and economic impact of the decision on the supertrawler to be taken into account. Indeed, they were moving an amendment to do so. As I said on that day, and I will say this again, the Greens should be stumping up right now and calling for that same social and economic impact on our rural communities to be taken into account. Why on earth does it apply to a fishing boat and not to our regional communities when it comes to the Greens? It is inconsistent and hypocritical.

The failure of the government to support agriculture goes on and on when we look at the Murray-Darling Basin because they simply cannot give us the answers that we need. They simply do not know what is going on. There is the complete failure of the government to show us what the environmental water holder is currently doing, what the benefit to the environment has been and how much water has been released. The failure of the government to do that leaves the agricultural communities hanging out to dry.

I asked a question back in April, during a Murray-Darling Basin hearing of the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs Committee that I am on, about how much water the environmental water holder was going to let go, how much they had let go in a given year, how they did measure the benefit, which environmental assets it was going to, and what the benefit to the environment was. I suppose it is fair enough that the department said they would take it all on notice. Indeed, Mr Robertson said he would be happy to make them available; they had not done them to date but they would be happy to do so—and I appreciate that. So what did we get? We got the answers to the question, and that was terrific. The only problem was it was 3,451 pages long. How this government can expect there to be any confidence in the decisions that they are making around the Murray-Darling Basin when the department gives senators an answer which is 3,451 pages long and expects us to be able to (a) take them seriously and (b) wade through that is incomprehensible. It is a complete failure by this government to manage this properly. So we did ask them, even taking into account that perhaps the department was being incredibly diligent, if they wouldn't mind just summarising the 3,451 pages for us. We did that on 4 September and we asked them to have it back to us by 13 September. It is now 20 September and it is a week overdue. We still have

not seen it. So we can only imagine that it just as difficult for the department to get through the 3,451 pages as it was for us because simply nothing has turned up yet. That is unacceptable.

We have \$1.9 billion spent by the government on water buybacks and yet only \$494 million has been spent on Better Infrastructure investments, through 'infrastructure and works and measures'. The litany of failure continues and the buybacks that they have done have been rash and not thought through—\$303 million to buy back entitlement from Twynam, over four or five river systems and Twynam offered it up as a job lot and there was no ability for the government to be able to determine whether or not the entitlement they were buying back across those rivers for each of those river systems was appropriate. 'Oh, no, we have to take the whole lot.' So \$303 million with no ability for oversight or proper scrutiny of which ones were actually going to be appropriate for the environment and value for money.

There is probably nothing that shows more clearly the government's absolute failure to support agriculture than bringing in a carbon tax. The undermining of future sustainability of primary industry through the carbon tax is going to be absolutely appalling. I know I use the word 'appalling' a lot, colleagues, but I tell you this: quite often it is the only thing we can use because it is the only word that is appropriate. This carbon tax—and as you will remember, colleagues, Prime Minister Julia Gillard had said 'there will be no carbon tax under a government I lead'—is going to hit regional Australia harder than anywhere else. Farmers are at the bottom of the food chain—and I will declare my interest as a farmer—and they have no ability to pass on the costs of fertiliser, electricity, chemicals, packaging. From 2014 the temporary exemption from tax on transport fuels will be removed. I know my colleague Senator Williams has been at the forefront in raising this issue, saying that this exemption is only going to be there for a minimal amount of time and then the fuel cost impact is going to get passed through to our farmers. A study released in June by business analysts IBIS World forecast the new carbon tax imposts would push down revenue for the agricultural sector next year by 6.4 per cent, from \$54 billion to \$50.5 billion in 2012-13. It gets even worse as from 2014 there would be a \$3.7 billion hit. Despite farmers being exempt from the direct tax, these costs are going to hit farmers harder than anyone else. What is quite extraordinary is the government trying to tell regional communities that the carbon tax will not be a problem. You try telling dairy farmers, meat processors and irrigators opening their power bills that the carbon tax does not apply to them. We are going to have a 9.7 per cent rise in dairy farm power bills. Milk companies will pass back the carbon price. According to Dairy Australia, the average cost per farm will be well over \$4,000. The list goes on and on.

In every area we look and everywhere we turn, it seems that this abject failure of the government to support Australian agriculture goes on and on. It is nowhere more stark than in my area of education. The Australian Council of Deans of Agriculture indicates a potential demand for around 6,000 tertiary qualified graduates per year in the sector. What have we got, Mr Acting Deputy President? We have a significant undersupply of graduates. We are actually seeing fewer than 800 graduates per year coming through our Australian universities. The government does not seem to understand that this will be a huge issue for our future sustainability, for food security in the future, if we do not address it now.

It seems that everywhere we turn the government is putting more barriers in place when it comes to agriculture and also when it comes to education. It is not just agricultural industries where there is a failure; there is also a failure on agricultural families. Credit where credit is due: Minister Evans has taken some successful steps forward in some areas of support when it comes to students. But the one area where he has not made the change he should have made after the complete stuff-up at the beginning of 2010—and I do again acknowledge the minister's very sensible backflip about 18 months later to restore some equity for regional students—is in students applying for independent youth allowance. Having a parental income cap of \$150,000 apply to those students whose parents earn that amount when they are applying for independent youth allowance is simply wrong.

Senator Williams: Disgraceful.

Senator NASH: Thank you, Senator Williams, I will take that interjection—it is disgraceful. There is a huge inequity for regional students when it comes to accessing tertiary education, and that is because of the cost of relocation and the difficulties of having to move away from home to access tertiary education. One of the ways they do so is by accessing some support through the independent youth allowance.

Senator Sterle interjecting—

Senator NASH: As you well know, Senator Sterle, and I know you understand, many of those students choose the path of working for a year, proving themselves independent of their parents to gain the assistance under the

criterion. Yet the government has said, 'I'm sorry, young Australian that is trying to apply for independent youth allowance—'particularly young regional Australian—if your parents earn \$150,000 combined before tax you can't apply. You are ineligible.' That is simply stupid. We are talking potentially about two parents, one who might be a schoolteacher and one who might be a police officer. The government are telling that family that that student cannot apply for independent youth allowance, cannot go and work their tail off for a year, cannot prove their independence from their parents because 'we're still going whack that cap on there'.

Normally we on this side are demanding things; normally we on this side are stamping our feet and being angry. I am pleading with the minister to listen to all of those regional families that this is affecting and to please, please provide some equity for those regional students, who so often choose not to go to university because of the difficulties in place, because of barriers like the \$150,000 parental income cap. That is just wrong. If this government were to change one thing to help regional students, that would be it. Mind you, there is a whole range of things but that is absolutely one of the priorities.

The list goes on and on. Unfortunately, time precludes me from exhausting the very long list of things that does prove that there is an abject failure by this Labor government to properly support Australia's agriculture, fishery and forestry industries. Our farmers are the backbone of this nation. They are not only now but into the future the absolute driving force, the engine room, of this nation. It is about time that this Labor government recognised that. It is about time that this Labor government stopped being so disconnected from regional communities and so disconnected from regional families and finally started listening to what is really needed out in regional Australia. This is not on. It is unacceptable. It is an abject failure by this government and people in rural and regional communities know that.