



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Food Labelling

SPEECH

Monday, 18 October 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Sidebottom, Sid, MP

Source House
Proof Yes
Responder
Question No.

Mr SIDEBOTTOM (Braddon) (11.36 am)—I am pleased to rise and speak in support of the motion from the member for Kingston, and I congratulate her on raising this important issue here in the House. I also congratulate her on her stunning election result, as I do you, Mr Deputy Speaker Adams, and my other colleagues in the House, and to new members I extend a welcome as well. My region of Tasmania has been prominent in raising the issue of farm and food labelling in particular for some time, with many Braddon farmers and their supporters bringing their tractors to parliament, as you might remember, in 2005. This was an attempt to highlight the plight of farmers who felt they were getting the raw end of the deal through unclear, confusing and, dare I say, even deceptive food labelling. I do not think that would be disagreed with by just about any member of this House.

Unfortunately, despite such a well-publicised and visual campaign, the case for better labelling still exists and another, independent, review—which has been mentioned by my colleagues—is now underway. I might be able to comment on that in a moment. While my colleague the member for Kingston has outlined the broader case, let me concentrate on the need for better labelling of vegetables. It is my contention that many people would buy more Australian food products if they could quickly and easily see that they were ‘Made in Australia’. By that I do not mean food products whose packaging was made here and then filled with an imported or partly imported product; I am talking about food products that were grown, harvested, processed and packed here. That should be ‘Made in Australia’. At present, it is difficult for even the experts to differentiate between the two, so how much more of a problem would it be for the average shopper?

Under the Trade Practices Act and food standards code, ‘Made in Australia’ can be used in the labelling of processed vegetables if more than 50 per cent of the value of the product is added in Australia, regardless of where the vegetables come from. The cost of the container or labelling can amount to up to 50 per cent of the product’s value, while the vegetables inside can come from almost anywhere. My own region has recently felt the impact of the vagaries in the international processed vegetable market with McCain Foods shutting down its vegetable factory in Smithton with the loss of 200 jobs and cutting the crops for about

100 growers. This, by the way, came out of the blue and without notice. It is a tough business, but Australians have a right to know exactly what they are buying.

I know the growers in my region are amongst the best in the world, and often they are required to meet numerous standards and regulations at home, while imported vegetables can fly under the radar; so real, accurate labelling would make the choice easier for people. Opponents argue that this is a disguised form of protectionism designed to impose a trade barrier on imported products. Obviously I would prefer people to be eating peas from Penguin and beans from Beulah—it supports the local economy and jobs—but I also believe that people should not have to try to work out which ‘Aussie’ vegetables are really grown, and not just packed, here. Current labelling standards are just not up to scratch. If people are given the chance to buy real Australian products, then the quality will win them over—I am confident of that.

Vegetable growing and processing is vital to my region and a number of other regions in this country. This was demonstrated at the recent election, when I was happy to stand alongside the Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, Senator Carr, at the Simplot vegetable plant in Ulverstone. The Labor government pledged \$3 million to help Simplot upgrade the Ulverstone plant to enable it to use natural gas, so securing 600 jobs and the future of this industry. Providing accurate labelling will also help to sustain this industry, and I note that it is in an area where Simplot has been taking a leadership role in the promotion of its own locally produced vegetables.

We should not be forcing people to buy Australian, but we should be giving them accurate and easy-to-read information which will allow them to make the choice. True labelling will be a vital part of helping farmers and the community to make healthy and informed choices, and I commend the motion to the House. I judge that all those opposite and on this side want something done, and we will have the opportunity to do something when that independent report is handed down. Perhaps then this House will do something of substance on this matter.