



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**PROOF**

**BILLS**

**Competition and Consumer Amendment  
(Country of Origin) Bill 2016**

**Second Reading**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 28 November 2016**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

<b>Date</b> Monday, 28 November 2016	<b>Source</b> House
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<b>Questioner</b>	<b>Responder</b>
<b>Speaker</b> O'Brien, Ted, MP	<b>Question No.</b>

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**Mr TED O'BRIEN** (Fairfax) (13:21): Australian country-of-origin labelling has proved to be a proverbial weeping sore, eroding consumer confidence, imposing excessive compliance costs and failing to provide fair and transparent safe-harbour defences to Australian farmers and food processors for far too long. It has been one of those perennial problems that has confounded successive governments, where almost everyone agreed there was a problem and that change was overdue, but the detail of the doing proved just too elusive, too complicated and just too damn hard. So down that time honoured road yet another can was kicked, but not by this coalition government. In its first term, it navigated a solution to country of origin labelling that comes to us today in this bill, together with the information standards that came into effect from 1 July 2016. And it is a solution that includes a consistent, highly visible, easy to interpret label with a logo, bar chart and text

In other words, what we see in this bill are the quintessential hallmarks of a coalition government: a willingness to tackle problems that others have happily thrown into the too-hard basket; an ability to find a solution that is fundamentally practical, neither overcooked nor ideological but based on good old fashioned pragmatic common sense; and a capacity to build consensus among the community, consumers and industry, key stakeholders and across the political divide. And what a great solution it is.

My nearly 25 years in business has been spent predominantly overseas, mainly in the Asia Pacific and emerging markets. For the first dozen or so of those years, I was in the food game working for Australian food companies, breaking into new markets and exporting Australian product, from commodities such as rice and wheat flour to more value-added fast moving consumer goods. Having therefore been a practitioner in the field, I want to commend the architects of this bill for settling on the kangaroo logo. Even though this bill relates to food sold domestically in Australia, it is important that mandatory food labels reconcile with our image of brand Australia. And, in my experience, there is no more recognised symbol that speaks to our identity of our country than the kangaroo and its symbol of quality, cleanliness, consistency and reliability.

As you know, the seat of Fairfax lies at the heart of Queensland's Sunshine Coast where food and agriculture are sectors that help drive the local economy. In consulting on this bill, I ran half a dozen public information booths at the Yandina market and at the Maroochydore Fisherman's Rd market and also a series of roundtables with local growers and other foodies. It was at these roundtables where the most meaningful contributions were made, due to intellectual giants of the Sunshine Coast food industry such as Julie Shelton, innovators like Tania Hubbard, producers like Steven Jeffers of Jeffers Markets and leaders from various sectors like: George Walker, eggs; Matthew Trace, dairy; Blake Nicolle, salads; and Jeremy Atkins, beef.

While most people with whom I consulted were overwhelmingly supportive of the county-of-origin reforms, local strawberry growers raised a concern. Their concern was with the transition period presented in an earlier iteration of the proposal that we debate today in the bill. You may not be aware, but the greater Sunshine Coast region accounts for at least 80 per cent of Queensland's strawberry crop, which equates to approximately 50 million punnets of strawberries and is perhaps the most significant producer region in Australia, employing up to 8,000 pickers each season. It was local strawberry grower Di West who first raised a concern that the business she runs with her sister Jodi risked losing tens of thousands of dollars' worth of plastic punnets stored in their warehouse unless the proposed transition period was extended. This led to significant consultations between them, the minister, his office and me, and also other growers such as the famous Twist Brothers of Chevallum.

And how pleasing it was to see that the solution that we found for Di, Jodi, the Twists and other growers to mitigate the risk of too short a transition period now finds forms in part of the bill before the House. On a personal level and as a relatively new MP in this Chamber, seeing the input that came from the grassroots of my electorate, from roundtables in Palmwoods to market stalls in Yandina and Maroochydore lead directly to legislative outcomes inspires great confidence in me in the process of parliamentary democracy.

There is an additional point that is worth making here, which puts this bill into a broader context. Many Australian growers and food manufacturing companies have been losing business in the domestic market to cheaper overseas imports. As a nation, we need to decide how to respond to this. We have a choice to make. Either we throw in the towel as the former speaker, the member for Kennedy, suggested we do and join the populists, spruiking false hope of prosperity through turning back the clock to an era of protectionism or we embrace free trade while seeking a more level playing field, stay on the field, play hard but fair and demand those who are also on that field play by the same set of rules. It is the latter of these two options that I choose. And that is precisely the spirit in which this bill has been put today.

On one hand, this bill levels the playing field by empowering consumers, by allowing them to be more informed and, on the other hand, this bill allows local players in the food industry to accentuate that which is their greatest differentiator—the fact that they, thanks to this bill, can be recognised as Australian.

I commend the bill as it has been put by the coalition to the House.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER ( Mr Coulton ): Order! The debate is interrupted in accordance with standing order 43. The debate may be resumed at a later hour.