

POTATOES FROM LIBYA - COMMENTS BY FEDERAL MEMBER FOR FORREST

336. Hon MATT BENSON-LIDHOLM to the Minister for Agriculture and Food:

My question is to the Leader of the House in his capacity as Minister for Education and Food.

Hon Kim Chance: Agriculture and Food.

Hon MATT BENSON-LIDHOLM: I am sorry, Agriculture and Food.

Several members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order, members! I think the Leader of the House has been invited to make an announcement!

Hon MATT BENSON-LIDHOLM: Will the minister advise whether the Western Australia government has entered into a secret agreement with Libya to import potatoes, as claimed by federal Liberal member of Parliament Geoff Prosser?

Hon KIM CHANCE replied:

Mr President, I thank Hon Matt Benson-Lidholm for what is definitely the question of the day! I was surprised yesterday to hear Mr Geoff Prosser claiming that the Western Australian potato industry has been exposed to potential cheap imports from Libya. I was surprised to hear that statement because it has no basis in fact whatever in any regard. It is true to this extent: the Western Australian government did sign a memorandum of understanding with Libya; it did so three and a half years ago, in fact. However, Mr Prosser has just caught up with that fact. Three and a half years ago we signed an MOU, but it includes no deal, secret or otherwise, for the importation of potatoes. Indeed, the MOU does not even mention potatoes. This all came from Geoff Prosser's fertile imagination. Had the federal member for Forrest bothered to check any of the facts in the matter, he would have realised that the MOU does not cite potatoes in any way. Libya is a net importer of potatoes; that means it buys them from somewhere else. On average, it has imported 9 000 tonnes per annum since 1990. The source for that figure is the web site of the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, which is just as available to Mr Prosser as it was to me.

Hon Ken Travers interjected.

Hon KIM CHANCE: Potatoes cannot be imported into Australia from Libya without the Australian government, of which Mr Prosser is a member and used to be a minister, providing an import protocol for that importation. All Mr Prosser had to do was go to another agency of his government and ask whether there is an import protocol from Libya, and he would have been told that no application for such a protocol has ever been made. There is no deal between the Western Australian government and Libya for the importation of potatoes, and where that claim came from, I do not know. Mr Prosser put out a media statement yesterday that carries on about secret trade deals. He says in one part of his statement that it makes one wonder what other secret trade deals Minister Chance has struck that have the potential to hurt Western Australian agricultural industries.

Hon Ken Travers interjected.

Hon KIM CHANCE: These secret trade deals are so secret that even I do not know about them! During my visit to Libya in 2002, I was accompanied by two Australian federal government officials: an Austrade representative from Dubai and the Australian Ambassador to Cairo, who has responsibility for the Libyan desk.

Hon Norman Moore: Is there any chance that you might finish this answer some time soon so that we can ask a few more questions?

Several members interjected.

Hon Norman Moore: We have asked only about five questions today.

Hon KIM CHANCE: Yes, and the opposition was lucky to get that many.

I am very proud of the memorandum of understanding with Libya. Since the Labor Party has been in government, our trade with the Middle East-North African region in agricultural commodities alone has doubled to \$1 billion. Part of that has been as a result of the Libyan MOU. I recently received advice from a Western Australian meat exporter -

Point of Order

Hon NORMAN MOORE: Is there any prospect that the minister can make a ministerial statement announcing these sorts of arrangements during the time of the house set aside for such a purpose, instead of taking up all of question time? Mr Prosser has nothing to do with this Parliament.

Several members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: I could not quite hear the last few comments of the Leader of the Opposition. The Leader of the House should sit down when I give the call to a member to address a point of order.

Hon NORMAN MOORE: My point of order is that we have arrangements in the house that provide occasions for ministerial statements to be made. This answer is sounding very much like a ministerial statement. I suggest that it is a waste of question time for ministers to give ministerial statements during that time, bearing in mind that we have a set 30 minutes today.

The PRESIDENT: I note the comments of the Leader of the Opposition. I do not consider the Leader of the House to be making a ministerial statement. The Leader of the House was asked a question, and he is entitled to answer that question. Members of the government are entitled to ask questions, as are members of the opposition.

Questions without Notice Resumed

Hon KIM CHANCE: Thank you, Mr President. To return to the precise nature of the question, I was asked a question by Hon Matt Benson-Lidholm about a matter raised by a member of the federal government that was designed to create concern among his constituents - among potato growers in the south west. A member of the federal Parliament, with all the authority that position carries, said something that was incorrect. I will not put it any stronger than that. It was just incorrect; it was sloppy work by the federal member for Forrest. I am thankful to Hon Matt Benson-Lidholm for giving the government in Western Australia an opportunity to correct a record that should never have been distorted in the way it was.