

Mr Paul Omodei; Mr Terry Waldron; Mr Ross Ainsworth; Mr Rod Sweetman; Mr Jeremy Edwards; Mr Brendon Grylls; Mr Bernie Masters; Mr Fran Logan; Mr Bill McNee

**SELECT COMMITTEE INTO DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND AGRICULTURE
PROTECTION BOARD**

Motion

MR P.D. OMODEI (Warren-Blackwood) [4.01 pm]: I move -

That a select committee of the Legislative Assembly be appointed to inquire into and report on -

- (a) the structure and future direction of the Department of Agriculture and the Agriculture Protection Board in Western Australia;
- (b) funding of the Department of Agriculture by government and the private sector;
- (c) whether the Department of Agriculture's responsibilities should be expanded or diminished;
- (d) whether there are conflicts between the Department of Agriculture, the Agriculture Protection Board and other government departments; and
- (e) what changes, if any, need to be made to ensure that the Department of Agriculture is agriculture focused,

and that the committee report to the Assembly by 30 August 2003.

I refer to the Department of Agriculture's annual report and a comment under the heading of "Customer focus" that I fully endorse, which reads -

For more than 100 years Western Australia's agricultural agencies have earned a national and international reputation for professionalism, objectivity and science excellence. This reputation is built on a commitment to quality and is reflected in the modern international agricultural practices used in Western Australia.

For members' information, I am passionate about agriculture. It has always been my ambition since entering public life to hold the agriculture portfolio. However, owing to the machinations of political parties, under agreement, the National Party has held that portfolio when in government.

Mr F.M. Logan: Come and join our side!

Mr P.D. OMODEI: I am deeply concerned when I can look across at the government benches at any time and not see one single person who is involved in agriculture. That does not bode too well for the future of agriculture in Western Australia. That is not to say that, as the parliamentary secretary, the member for Cockburn is not interested in agriculture. It means that there are members opposite who have never really had dirt under their fingernails. Most of them are academics. The member for Hillarys tells me that the parliamentary secretary used to sell tomatoes in Croydon when he was in the old country!

I can recall very clearly as a 10-year-old boy being with my father digging spuds in the bog, pulling them out by hand and getting the horse and sledge to cart them to the shed only to see them go rotten a few days later. I also recall clearly as a young 15-year-old, with my older brother, Johnny, cutting up 500 big dead karri trees with a McCulloch 73A chainsaw that had a four-foot blade. Our safety gear comprised a hat and a pair of black shorts. We used five wedges and a sledgehammer.

I can recall very clearly the late sixties when my mother, with dust all over her face, worked at the front of a harvester and then went home and fed and clothed us. She looked after us very well. I can remember seeing my late father working at the front of the potato harvester after he was blinded in a blasting accident when he was only 38 years old. With almost no sight whatsoever, he would take off 11 000 bags of potatoes a year from the front of the harvester and hardly spill a spud.

I know a little about agriculture. I have not only been involved in horticulture production and cattle breeding but I also still know how to castrate a calf and dehorn a bull, whether it be with a Burdizzos or a knife.

Mr R.N. Sweetman interjected.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: The member for Ningaloo has reminded me that I sometimes wonder whether Burdizzos could be used on some government members in this place! It would make their eyes water, but it might make them perform a little better!

Agriculture is a very important industry in this State and I am passionate about it, hence this motion on a topic that I have been concerned about for some time. Despite all the very good things that the Department of Agriculture has done over the years, it is tragic to see it deteriorate due to reduced funding that limits the ability of departmental officers to conduct research that is vital to the State. The 2001-02 budget papers indicate that

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under the previous Government a budget allocation of \$165 229 000 was made for the year 2000-01. That was reduced to \$135 million. The budget was to be maintained at \$132 million in 2002-03. However, its funding was reduced by this Government from the previous Government's predicted figure to \$128 million and has decreased in the forward estimates from \$168 million to \$135 million and from \$128 million to \$122 million and is going south at a rate of knots. The previous Government considered agriculture to be a high-profile portfolio and would have maintained the out years at around the \$130 million mark. Spending on agriculture has been reduced by at least \$8 million in the past financial year. I understand that agriculture will be cut by a further seven per cent this year. That is a matter of deep concern to me and, I am sure, to many farmers throughout rural Western Australia.

One of the advantages of being in public life and having a foot in both camps - one in agriculture and one in public life - is the ability to look objectively at issues in agriculture around Western Australia. Most people in rural Western Australia would say that politicians know bugger all about anything and would not know the proverbial from clay even if they tasted it. That is an indictment on us as members. As a country member, I can do full well the things I used to do many years ago and communicate on a farming level, whether in the paddock or in the pub. That is very important. The message is coming back to me thick and fast and with all sincerity. The people involved do not know the future of the Department of Agriculture in this State. Its funding is being slashed. The department and the Agriculture Protection Board, which have very important roles in the economy of Western Australia, are dying the death of 1 000 cuts, and with that goes the brain drain. All the good people in agriculture who know full well that the department's diminishing role will not be good for them are leaving the department. That must be of real concern to the director of the department. It must also be of real concern to the Minister for Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. The minister conducts himself well, although he is not always liked in the community. I would like to see him provide much more support for issues that are important in rural Western Australia. I am told that this request by me for a parliamentary select committee will be refused by the Government on the basis that the agriculture management Bill, the knowledge of which is new to me, will be introduced into Parliament next year and that a consultation process will be undertaken.

My extended family is still involved in agriculture. I know lots of people involved in agriculture and none of them have told me about the so-called agriculture management Bill. Obviously, there will be a consultation process. We will join that and support it. The idea of a parliamentary select committee with the bipartisan support of the Liberal and National Parties, chaired by a government member, is a concession to the Government to have a good look at agriculture to see what its future will be. The Agriculture Protection Board, which represents one small section of the Department of Agriculture and has a small budget of a few million dollars that is currently being maintained, is being hit with an avalanche of work. The APB is required to look after agriculture through eradicating pests and diseases, and this includes wild dogs. As the parliamentary secretary would know, in the north eastern wheatbelt and across the Nullarbor, wild dogs are a big problem yet to be resolved. The APB has to deal with weeds such as blackberries, watsonia, arum lily, bridal creeper and Noogoora burr - there are 20 weeds on the national register that are required to be controlled by the APB. In addition, it must control feral animals, whether it is donkeys, goats or wild dogs - anything that threatens agriculture. It is also responsible for research and agricultural improvements.

I recently attended the pastoral conference in Mt Magnet. There is no doubt the pastoral industry in Western Australia is under attack. The current Government is unwilling to renew pastoral leases; 2015 will be a watershed for pastoralists across the State. They are being blackmailed into a situation in which they are forced to negotiate with the Department of Land Administration and the Department of Environment, Water and Catchment Protection about the excision of their leases and conditions on the leases. One old pastoralist told me recently that, in the heyday of his station at Yalgoo, he used to run 32 000 sheep. He is now running 16 000 and the condition of the roll-over of the lease is that he has to run 6 000 sheep. That will make the station completely unviable.

When I visit pastoral areas I see so many opportunities. I ask myself who should be responsible. A lot of pastoralists will say that they do not want a bar of the Department of Agriculture because they have had poor experiences of it. As an outsider, with a foot in both camps, and looking objectively at what should be done in agriculture in Western Australia, I would have thought that the Department of Agriculture should have primacy in the management of rangeland. The Department of Conservation and Land Management and the Department of Environment, Water and Catchment Protection dictate to pastoralists exactly what they have to do in the future. Many of the families have been in charge of the lands for more than 100 years. They are part of a very proud industry. They are very proud people who are suffering severely as a result of three years of drought.

Having a minister responsible for agriculture with primacy over ministers responsible for land and the environment is a good idea. No-one in the State is suggesting we should not protect the environment. It should be done in cooperation with the people who have been the stewards of the land for decades, if not a century. A

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person does not have to be a Philadelphia lawyer or a scientist to work that out. All a person needs is a bit of commonsense. The agriculture industry in Western Australia has been one of the greatest industries. It should be developed into one of the great industries of this State and this nation. A person has only to look at how the mining industry is funded and compare that with agriculture. I was speaking to the member for Merredin earlier today about that matter and the corporate sponsorship of agriculture in Western Australia. Young farmers today are some of the best educated, brightest and progressive people in the land. They need our total support. There is no way we can do that with the budgets of the Department of Agriculture in this State; we can see where it is heading.

My motion mentions the structure and future direction of the Department of Agriculture. In a cooperative way, we could develop a fantastic department. Its current resources are being limited, particularly by this Labor Government. I implore members opposite to talk to people with power in the Government, whether it is the Treasurer, Under Treasurer or the Premier - I do not care. To diminish the role of agriculture in this State is not a good thing. The parliamentary select committee I am proposing would look at the role of agriculture to see where cooperation between the private sector and government could be expanded. It may well be that the bureaucracy in the department would be slightly diminished and private sector involvement and sponsorship increased. We will not know that until we talk to the younger generations in farming and draw on the experience of the older generations. We must ask them what they think about this, which is what we in this Parliament are supposed to do. We are supposed to listen to people.

When the Premier was waxing lyrical during question time today about all the things that will happen with tomorrow's budget, I thought to myself that there is a Grand Canyon between city Western Australia and rural and regional Western Australia. There is a huge gulf that is getting wider by the day. That issue should be in the forefront of our minds. What are we doing to regional and rural Western Australia? In days gone by the populations of the city and country were almost equal. Country towns had their own fire brigades, cricket teams and football teams. Members could drive in any direction they liked for six or seven hours to get a very clear picture of what is happening in country Western Australia. It is not all due to technology, bulk handling and new science; it is due to the negligence of Governments that ignore the needs of rural and regional Western Australians. It is a matter of real concern to me. I am sure members on this side involved in agriculture have similar thoughts.

The former Minister for Agriculture, Hon Monty House, tried very hard to decentralise the Department of Agriculture. He tried to put it back in rural areas so that farmers could have better access, rather than have it controlled from downtown Perth. That was one of his major achievements as a minister. It is something we should continue to do; we should put the Department of Agriculture back out there.

I have mentioned funding of the Department of Agriculture by the Government and the private sector. There must be huge opportunities for us to tap into the money market, superannuation funds and corporate sponsorship to assist the department in its research and extension. We know that, in the past, the department had a very strong research and extension program. The extension program has diminished over the past few decades. The people involved are now going to the private sector to consult. That is not all bad, but the department still needs a core activity strongly advised - I am not saying it is not strongly advised - by people in rural Western Australia.

My motion asks whether the responsibilities of the Department of Agriculture should be expanded or diminished. We will find out only by talking to people in rural Western Australia. The only way we can do that is by having an investigative group that can take opinions and evidence and report to the Parliament and the Government so the Government knows which direction to take.

Another part of the motion relates to whether there are conflicts between the Department of Agriculture, the Agriculture Protection Board and other government departments. I have extreme concerns whether the department is the Department of Agriculture or just "the department". It seems to me there are other government departments that encroach on or impose their will on the Department of Agriculture and the rural sector in Western Australia. That came home to me strongly when I attended the pastoral conference last week with the Leader of the Opposition. I am talking about departments such as the Department of Conservation and Land Management that seem to be gathering momentum and strength on the green side. The fact of the matter is that farming, pastoralism and wool, meat, grain and horticultural production will have an impact on the environment. I have said it before in this place and I will say it again: there is no way that a farmer would deliberately destroy the very asset that provides him with an income and a living and that impacts on the economy of his district. If it does happen - there is the rare occasion on which it does - it is usually because of an act of God; that is, some kind of climatic event, whether it be lightning, hail, flood, fire or whatever. That does happen from time to time. It is certainly not done deliberately by a farmer, because if a farmer deliberately degraded, overcropped, overfertilised or oversprayed, the land would deteriorate, he would lose the asset and he would be out of business in a very short time. It is likewise in the pastoral industry. Those in the pastoral and wheat industries experience

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some very severe changes in climatic conditions. The other day we drove past New Norcia on the way to Mt Magnet - to save the taxpayers some money - and there was barely a blade of green grass for the next 500 kilometres. I thought to myself that these people have had to put up with these events for the past three years. However, we never hear a negative word from them.

Mr R.N. Sweetman interjected.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: They certainly have had two and half years of hard times. They always put their best foot forward. No wonder they get frustrated when they come up against government departments such as the Department of Environmental Protection and some of the bureaucrats who really do not have a good understanding or the foot in both camps that a lot of these people have. There is no doubt that animals die in large numbers during droughts. What do we do? There are a lot of feral animals in pastoral areas. At the moment one of the most feral animals, the goat, is contributing to the survival of some of those pastoralists. When an operator must rely on a domesticated feral animal for his survival, it does not augur well for the future. A raft of issues, such as introducing new breeds into the wool industry, contamination of fibre and national livestock identification schemes, are a huge challenge for rural and pastoral Western Australia.

We need a Department of Agriculture that is properly funded and focused and that will respond to the needs of people in the community. That is why I moved this motion in the Parliament. The Water and Rivers Commission is talking about introducing an administration fee for dams in the south west of Western Australia, some of which have been in existence for 60 or 70 years, at great expense to farmers and at no expense to the blooming Government. There has been no consultation whatsoever. I would like the Department of Agriculture to give the Water and Rivers Commission a good old whack and tell it that if it wants to license these dams, it should hit the taxpayers of Western Australia. There are farmers in my area of Warren-Blackwood who have at least half a dozen dams and all of a sudden, out of the blue, they have been told via the *Government Gazette* that they will be charged an administration fee for their dams. I have spent \$100 000 on my dam in the past four years. I do not mind doing that. It is my dam; it is my responsibility. However, for God's sake, the Government should not start charging me for the water. Basically, it is a de facto charge on water. It is a complex issue and should have been run past the farming sector before some avaricious bureaucrats tried to impose their will on rural Western Australia.

I can tell the parliamentary secretary that farmers have said to me that they would prefer to go to jail rather than pay a fee for their water. If the Government is really serious about charging an administration fee, it should start with the 800 000 backyard bores in Perth. If it gives notice that it intends to register those bores and charge people an administration fee, it will be out of government so fast its feet will not even touch the ground. That is why previous Governments over the years have never applied a fee to backyard bores in Perth; nor should it do the same thing to people in rural Western Australia, who produce food not only for the people in the metropolitan area as well as the rest of Western Australia, but also for export to generate a new and expanding agricultural industry.

As I said, the farming industry is under duress. It is dying the death of a thousand cuts. When I came into this Parliament 15 years ago I was extremely concerned about farming production costs. I suggested to the then Labor Government that it establish a parliamentary select committee to look at farming costs; that is, issues such as the costs of machinery, fuel, fertilisers, chemicals and so on. It was rejected. Anybody who knows anything about agriculture will know where farming costs are going. If people compare those costs with farm returns, they will know where agriculture is going. How efficient can a farmer become? There is a limit. That is a matter of real concern to me.

I went through the annual report of the department. I do not want to beleaguer the Parliament, but the department's mission is to accelerate the success of agriculture, food and fibre industries through innovations in the production, processing, marketing and stewardship of our natural resources. How will it do that when its budget has been cut continuously over the past two years and will be cut into the future? The Liberal Party will work cooperatively with the Government if it will give a new focus and a new budget to the Department of Agriculture. Let us put a smile on the faces of those people who are shearing, mulesing or harvesting their product before dawn or late into the night. They are part and parcel of folklore in Western Australia. They are part of the rich history and the fabric of our society. What are we doing to those people? We are kicking them in the guts. We are giving them a hard time. I came into this place as a humble spud farmer. How is that?

Mr T.K. Waldron: Very humble!

Mr P.D. OMODEI: This is a small ask. It is a bipartisan request for a parliamentary select committee, chaired by the Labor Party - I am even prepared to concede to the Government the chairmanship of the committee - so that we can say to farmers that the Government of Western Australia is interested in their future and that it wants to know where they think the Department of Agriculture should go in Western Australia, whether they think the

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budget should be increased and what kind of partnerships there should be between the private sector and the department. We want to make our Department of Agriculture in Western Australia the best Department of Agriculture in the world. It is probably close to that now. However, how can it maintain its performance at the moment when its budget is being cruelled every year. We must put a stop to the slide that is occurring right now. If the member for Cockburn, who lives in Swanbourne, suggests to me that the panacea to all this will be the Government's new agricultural management Bill, I will go outside and thump him. It is just not good enough to come into this Chamber with excuses for the agriculture budget heading south at a rate of knots. It is not acceptable to me, it is not acceptable to this side of the House and it is not acceptable to farmers and the people in agriculture.

Since I have been the shadow minister for agriculture - both between 1989 and 1993 and in recent times - my telephone has run hot with calls from people within the Department of Agriculture telling me that any time I want to talk to them about where I think the future of the department should go, I should let them know on a confidential basis and they will give me all the information on it. We should not have to go to that extent. We should have an open door so that those people employed by the department or within the industry can suggest how we can improve things.

Our agriculture industry has just experienced one of most difficult seasons since the settlement of this country. The Department of Agriculture has probably done as much as it possibly can to soften the blow, to attract funds to assist those who are in dire need and so on. The Minister for Agriculture, a former farmer and a member of the Western Australian Farmers Federation, travels around Western Australia as ministers for agriculture usually do. He is a hail-fellow-well-met person. We want to put pressure on the minister. We want to know what will happen if one vote, one value is pushed through by the Government. I would expect that the Minister for Agriculture would be saying to the Government that one vote, one value will not be good for regional Western Australia. If the Government punishes rural Western Australia and it does not deliver the maximum for the State, the economy of the State will suffer. I want to know what the minister will do about roads. Will we ever get another central saleyard, or will this issue go on and on? I want to know where the \$14 million will go, and I have questions about other matters. There are many questions in the agriculture portfolio that must be answered. There is certainly not enough time to talk about all of them here today.

Mr C.J. Barnett: No-one on that side of the House can claim to have any empathy with farming at all, and yet it is one of the great founding industries in this State.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Yes, it is.

Mr F.M. Logan: Nobody on your side of the House has any empathy with workers.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: The member for Cockburn's comment does not deserve a response. It is an example of the lack of knowledge that members of the Labor Party have about agriculture in Western Australia. It is a very proud industry. This is a simple request to the Government for bipartisan and cooperative support so that we can determine -

Mr M.P. Whitely: The collective orchardists in my area said the previous Government did nothing about their situation for eight years. They reckon that this Minister for Agriculture is the best minister since sliced bread.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: The member is a school teacher from Roleystone. He should go and talk to his orchardists about elevating platforms and what WorkSafe Western Australia is doing to them.

Mr M.P. Whitely: I have!

Mr P.D. OMODEI: The member had to, otherwise he would be dead meat - it is as simple as that. The member for Roleystone is probably one of the few members on the other side of the House who represents farmers - and he is a school teacher. That is a bit of a worry. Given that he represents a rural constituency, I would have thought that the member for Roleystone would have been keen to get a parliamentary select committee to consider where agriculture is headed in the future. If he votes against this motion, we will have no alternative but to remind his rural constituents that he does not give a damn about agriculture or about the stone fruit and apple growers in his electorate. It is as simple as that. The member for Roleystone cannot have it both ways. He either supports agriculture and the people in his electorate, or he votes against them. I would like him to vote with us on this issue. That would make sense; one does not have to be a scientist to work that out. The member for Roleystone is a school teacher and is supposed to be very logical. He can work that out himself.

Mr M.P. Whitely interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr J.P.D. Edwards): Member for Roleystone, the member for Warren-Blackwood has the floor.

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Mr P.D. OMODEI: I have relatives in Roleystone. I will let them know what the member for Roleystone has been saying about me. We will see what they will do to him. It is steep country in Roleystone. They may put the member up on one of those elevating platforms and leave him there for a few days.

I will tell members about some of the figures involved in this issue. The gross value of agricultural production in WA in 2001-02 was \$4.874 million and exports were estimated at \$3.751 million. The wheat harvest was down last year because of the drought. The price of wool is picking up. There are in the order of 9 000 meat and 7 000 wool producers in Western Australia. Therefore, we are not talking about small numbers. We are talking about a large industry that is spread across the 2.5 million square kilometres of this State. Agriculture is a very important industry. If members scratch anybody in the metropolitan area, apart from the member for Cockburn who is probably an immigrant, they will find that most people in WA -

Mr F.M. Logan: I am not from an agricultural area either.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Croydon, England does not sound like an agricultural area. Many people in metropolitan Perth have direct contact with regional and rural Western Australia. The Labor Party must think about that a little bit, because those people are asking themselves about what this Government is doing to people in regional and rural WA. Members on the other side of the House should consider that very important question. This motion is not a big deal; it will not break the State of Western Australia. Rather, it will create an opportunity for the Government of the day to work with the Opposition for the benefit and betterment of the Western Australian agriculture industry. That is an easy request to which the Government can accede. I implore the parliamentary secretary and members opposite to act in a bipartisan way for a change and agree to what is a straightforward motion that will be for the good of Western Australia.

MR T.K. WALDRON (Wagin) [4.36 pm]: I strongly support the motion put forward by the member for Warren-Blackwood, and I endorse the things about which he spoke passionately. He has lived that life and understands it. I enjoyed listening to what he had to say, because it got to the core of the matter.

Like the member for Warren-Blackwood, I have been involved in farming and agriculture for most of my life. I have also been involved in businesses that relate to the agricultural industry and to the Department of Agriculture. That is important to note at the start. The farming side of this issue is very important; however, the effects are also felt by other regional businesses, which are very important to country WA. Across the region that I represent, concern has been expressed about the state and future of the Department of Agriculture. Given the issues that have been raised, the motion to send these matters to a select committee is certainly the right way to go. As I see it, the future of the Western Australian Department of Agriculture is at a crossroad. The Labor Government has changed the department's direction and has reshaped what, over the years, has been a very cohesive agency that has been highly regarded by farmers and regional businesses. It was regarded as their principal source of scientific and technical advice. In many cases, it was also their principal source of reassurance because it enabled them to go ahead and run their important businesses. Issues such as internal restructuring and funding have built up over the past two years. The department is now at the point at which sound decisions are needed to ensure a more focused service delivery. At the end of the day, service delivery is very much what we are talking about.

State government funding has been slashed since this Government was elected. There is no doubt about that. The department's budget was dealt a massive blow in the Labor Government's last state budget. Approximately 150 positions have been lost in regional WA. With first-hand knowledge, I can state that positions have been lost from my region. There have been savage cuts to research and development funding, which are extremely important areas. I am apprehensive about the funding that will be lost when the budget is delivered tomorrow. As a result of tomorrow's budget, I wonder how many more jobs will be lost in country WA. As the member for Warren-Blackwood emphasised, when jobs are lost, the rural communities that are already under many different and varied pressures in these modern and technological times feel the effects. We should always keep that fact in the back of our minds. This issue is not just about the service; it is also about the effects that are felt by those communities. As each community loses a service or a business, there is a snowball effect. I know that members on this side of the House, and many members opposite, understand that, but they do not experience the reality of it. Perhaps more members need to experience that reality. We have already heard reports about staff changes at Merredin and other centres. The Minister for Agriculture has said that staff reductions and transfers have not been ruled out.

Like the member for Warren-Blackwood, I agree that the minister conducts himself well in the community. I feel he is a good person, with some very good intentions, but there is a lack of support from the government side of the House for him and the department, which is what we are talking about today. The number of full-time employees in the department's work force fell from 1 704 in 2000-01 to 1 608 the following year, and further to 1 553 in 2002-03. That is a substantial reduction. Research and development is a crucial component of Western

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Australia's \$3.8 billion agricultural industry. An industry that generates 15 per cent of the State's total export revenue annually needs investment in expertise and facilities. We do not need a contraction of services, which I am concerned will continue. The Department of Agriculture is recognised widely as an excellent training ground for young people. We need to attract young people to country Western Australia, not try to get rid of them; but funding cuts over the past two years have eroded that training base. There are examples of that in my area.

I am not talking now about the Department of Agriculture and its staff. They do an excellent job, and the people in the department work hard. Over the past couple of years, when we have had drought and tough seasonal conditions, their workload has increased, as has been the case in other parts of the community. Losing staff just doubles that effect. I take my hat off to them. If the funding is taken away, there will be few opportunities for young people who want to work in agriculture to develop those expert skills. There will be further problems down the track; we are talking not just about the present.

Consolidated funding dropped from \$84.3 million in the 2000-01 state budget to \$79.9 million in 2001-02. It was reduced further to \$78.7 million in 2002-03. I fear for what we will see tomorrow. We need funding to be reinstated to foster research and to give those young people the opportunities. This is quite a meagre amount for such a vital service to the industry. Labor's consolidated funding cuts have the flow-on effect to regional communities, which I have already talked about, and also put primary industry at risk. The Government does not seem to understand that agriculture is one of the main drivers of the Western Australian economy. It is an important part of the economy; it has been so historically and will continue to be. The Government also does not understand that Department of Agriculture officers and their families are vital to the health and wellbeing of rural communities. They have a professional role, but they are also part of the community, and play an important part in social, sporting and service clubs. In smaller communities that is really important, and is becoming increasingly so. Funding cuts mean fewer opportunities for farming and regional businesses. I stress again that the department's advice across a whole range of rural businesses involves a lot more than farmers. While the farming side is very important, other businesses rely heavily on the expertise in the field. They link to the department's services when they need them most.

Labor promised to review the overall operational structure of the department, and it has implemented a restructuring process that has resulted in significant changes. This has included the rationalisation of several centres and offices. For example, the wool desk was moved from Fremantle to South Perth; district offices at Pinjarra and Harvey were consolidated to Waroona; and the Busselton district office was consolidated within the Vasse research station. Quite a number of activities have been transferred to other government departments, and important positions have not been replaced. Expertise has been lost. Issues such as land care, conservation and land clearing are increasingly being brought under the control of the Department of Conservation and Land Management, the Environmental Protection Authority and the Water and Rivers Commission. The member for Warren-Blackwood touched strongly on that. It is frustrating for farmers and rural businesses that the Department of Agriculture is no longer the prime deliverer of services dealing with such matters. Farmers are dealing with agencies that do not fully comprehend their situation, and that can cost them valuable time and money. Frustration builds up, and things do not seem to be working properly. Staff have been brought back to the city base and modern facilities in regional towns are now under-utilised. There are some excellent facilities in regional areas. The previous minister needs a pat on the back for some of those facilities. In my own area of Katanning, there is a magnificent facility, and the other day I went to Albany and looked at the great facility down there. They are great facilities and, if we wish to be professional and do it properly, we need those facilities in our country towns. The problem is that under the present situation, these facilities are not properly staffed, and in some cases parts of them are being wasted. There is plenty of room for people to be there carrying out their roles. This Government must recognise that agriculture needs strong support services, based in the regions and not centralised in Perth. I spent some years in Perth in my previous position. Living in Perth took me away from the hands-on situation in the country, and I found that I was not in touch with things that were happening. In my previous role, at times, I would go back out to the country to do something, and someone would say something and I would wonder what they were talking about. Because I was not there on the ground, I was not aware of all the issues. That is why it is important that these people be located in regional areas. The central offices and the expertise are needed in Perth, but people still need to be on the ground to relay what is really needed in country areas.

One of the most notable changes since Labor came to power is the placement of the Agriculture Protection Board within the Department of Agriculture. Labor pledged, as part of its pre-election commitments, to rebuild the Agriculture Protection Board as a cohesive unit, incorporating inspection and operational functions on a region-by-region basis. That has not happened; the Government has not delivered on this promise, and slashing the budget for agricultural protection has put primary industry at severe risk. The APB used to fall under a separate Act of Parliament and be governed by a separate board with a separate budget, but it has now been

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absorbed into the department. I wonder what priorities come first under the one budget. The APB has subsequently moved away from any form of control and inspection, and has taken up a policing role. It largely focuses on penalties and ignores the need to educate farmers and provide subsequent advice and information.

I will cite an example from my old home town of Kojonup. Late last year, there was a clearing sale. We used to see inspectors at those clearing sales. There were sheep there with footrot. No-one inspected them and no-one realised there was a problem. The next thing was that people bought these sheep and went back to their farms, and there were problems over the whole area. Had the staff, resources and funding been available, that would not have happened. Now a whole range of farms are under quarantine, which costs the farmers money, causes them and their neighbours personal heartache and worry, and gives the area a bad name. It has a real effect. That is just one small example. This is something we need to get back to. Whoever is in power, and whatever happens, the inspectors need to be available.

Some of my colleagues have been more involved in this than I have, but it appears that the State's handling of the skeleton weed program is muddled and is jeopardising 40 years of eradication effort in Western Australia. Skeleton weed has now become the responsibility of the farmer, and although most farmers do not walk away from it, they are obligated to take all necessary steps to eradicate the weed from their properties. Most will do that, and while the National Party supports greater grower control, we believe that a statewide coordinating body is required to ensure the long-term success of the program. It takes only one or two farmers to not be vigilant to destroy the whole intent of the program and all the efforts of the other landowners. A level of government support is needed to ensure that this does not happen. The push to restructure the skeleton weed program came about because the department did not want to build on the current program, and as a result, no further funding has been forthcoming. We need to look at that, because the end result will be that the department will not maintain an interest in or focus on the control of skeleton weed in this State. This is a real concern, because the prevalence of skeleton weed and this lack of focus will mean that skeleton weed will not be eradicated from the State. The Government must pledge that it will continue to provide a high-level commitment to control the prevalence of skeleton weed. It is doubtful that will ever come about, given Labor's current position to review the program on a yearly basis. By slashing \$40 million from the overall Department of Agriculture budget over two years, the Gallop Government is forcing the department to dispose of services across the board. The Government must ask itself what it wants the department to deliver, such as inspectors and the like.

To stay in business, farmers need productivity gains on a regular basis. Many have established long-term relationships with department staff and seek advice on a range of issues such as farm management, crop varieties and breeding programs. If funding cuts force these services to diminish, those farmers will not be able to produce the same end result. That will affect not only those farmers, but also the whole industry, their local communities and the State. The reality is that it will affect Australia. The Department of Agriculture needs critical funding to allow these services to continue at the local level and for inroads to be made, particularly in research and development. The Labor Government is doing a huge disservice to the department with the level of funding it is providing. The department is in dire straits at the moment. Grassroots involvement from people outside the department is needed in the department's decision-making process on its projects and activities. Scientists presently make most of those decisions. Enormous benefits would result from widening that process to include consultation with a variety of people such as farmers and the other people the programs ultimately affect. Once again, I refer to people with practical knowledge.

The relationship between the Department of Agriculture and the private sector is another important issue. The magnitude of grower funds for research and development is rapidly increasing. The Government must facilitate the Department of Agriculture with funding, resources and support to enable it to supply expertise and to capitalise on funding from private organisations. It will not be able to fully capitalise on that funding if the State Government does not provide its support.

In closing, I emphasise that the National Party strongly supports the Department of Agriculture and the people within that organisation for the important role they play in agriculture and rural life. The organisation and the people within it must be recognised, funded and properly resourced so that they can improve what they currently do and can continue to carry out their important role, not just now but also for the future of our rural communities, this State and, indeed, Australia.

I am concerned about the low morale of people in the department in my area. Like those in the electorate of the member for Warren-Blackwood, these people live in the local community. We talk to these people at the tennis or the footy, or have a beer with them. People just talk to us, not so much in our official roles, but as mates and associates. There is obviously a problem when phone calls are made by staff. Those problems need to be addressed. The referral of this matter to a select committee so that it can consider all the issues I have spoken

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about is a really sensible way to go. I congratulate the member for putting forward this motion. It is important that these issues be referred to a select committee. I support this motion.

MR R.A. AINSWORTH (Roe) [4.53 pm]: I also strongly support this motion for a range of reasons. I am sure that the members of this House who have been members of select committees in the past will relate to what I am about to say. Select committees take away some of the party politics that one tends to find within this Chamber and gets people to look at issues in a way that diffuses the politics and gets to the nub of the question. This question of the future of the Department of Agriculture is so important that a select committee comprising a cross section of the political structure of this Parliament is the way to address it.

I was interested to read the terms of reference suggested in the motion, because I have with me a series of questions put to the Minister for Agriculture by a group called the Esperance Regional Forum in a letter dated 30 January. The Esperance Regional Forum is made up of 11 regional producer groups that cover an area ranging from east of Esperance at Condingup, up to Salmon Gums and out through the lakes areas and the Ravensthorpe shire. It covers quite a big area of the agricultural region. Also involved in that group are the two major farm organisations, the Western Australian Farmers Federation and the Pastoralists and Graziers Association. These groups collectively put these questions to the minister -

- a) What priority does Government put on the Primary Industry portfolio and how it is going to serve the needs of agriculture in remaining productive, sustainable and continuing to contribute to the economic well being of Western Australia?
- b) What are the priorities of the Department of Agriculture in W.A.?
- c) If the Government is reducing services in district offices and concentrating them in regional offices, considering the logistical problems, how do you see farmers and pastoralists being satisfactorily serviced over the great distances of W.A. from a few regional centres? Local farmers feel they are becoming more and more isolated due to current policies.
- d) What is the Government's view of the importance of Natural Resource Management? With the probable removal of two permanent and important Agricultural Resource Management (ARM) officers, future work in this area with farmers is very limited.

The final question was on a local issue -

- f) Given that Esperance represents approximately 10% of the states agricultural area and is different in many respects from Albany, why are Albany and Esperance still run as one region?

I can see a big similarity between the intent behind those questions and the five points raised in the member for Warren-Blackwood's motion. The questions and the member's motion both ask the Parliament and the Government to look at what is happening with the Department of Agriculture and whether it is working in the best interests of the agricultural industry and the State of Western Australia; whether improvements can be made in the internal policies of the department through government policy or whatever else it might happen to be; and to recommend those changes for the benefit of all. They have not been put forward to criticise one Government or another, but to make sure that we do our best for the State of Western Australia. That is the nub of this whole question. It is not a matter of politicking but of getting things right for our economy and for a very important part of our State. As the previous speakers have mentioned, it is not just a small, also-ran industry, but a significant and major primary industry that contributes to the wellbeing of Western Australia and the whole nation.

I support the motion on those grounds alone. However, I wish to touch on a couple of other issues relating to the current structure of the agriculture portfolio. I will go through them in the order in which I have written them down. The Agriculture Protection Board has been mentioned a couple of times this evening. Its absorption into the Department of Agriculture, as opposed to being a separate entity, is a step in the wrong direction. The APB is seen by many producers as having lost or changed focus. One big question I am constantly asked by farmers is what is the priority within the department on APB matters. As there is one global budget, will the poor relation of the bigger department - that is, the APB - be starved of funds, particularly when there are budget cuts? That could well be the case.

I today received a call from a constituent in Varley on wild dog control. That is a serious problem throughout not only the pastoral regions but also a big part of the agricultural area, virtually to the south coast.

The other question that has been raised relates to the future of the skeleton weed eradication program. Although that program has not been successful in eradicating skeleton weed, it has been very successful in identifying and containing the majority of new outbreaks. In some places it has reduced those outbreaks to the point at which the skeleton weed is eradicated. However, it has not eradicated the problem statewide. If we continue down the

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current track, that weed will get out of control and the economic impact will be significant for not only agricultural producers but also the rest of the State.

Another problem that has raised its head again in the past few weeks, and which is a problem across a couple of sectors of agriculture, is bovine Johne's disease. Questions are being asked about the appropriateness of the existing quarantine measures and the checking mechanisms. People are asking whether the existing state border controls, including the three-year quarantine period, are sufficient; whether there should be total closure of the border to animals imported from the eastern States; and what should be the process for protecting the sheep industry in this State from this disease. The resolution of those matters, which could potentially have a very big financial impact on our State's growers, is being put at risk by the doubts about the ability of the Department of Agriculture to adequately deal with these sorts of issues and a range of other matters that are outside quarantine. The people asking those questions have not been prompted by members of Parliament. We are not - perhaps with the exception of one of my colleagues! - going around trying to stir up political mileage by saying that the Government is doing a bad job. The farmers and pastoralists are approaching us. The bulk of the inquiries I receive is from concerned industry groups. I mentioned the Esperance Regional Forum, which represents over 1 000 farmers. Those people are asking those questions of the minister and me, as their local member, because of a genuine concern that is felt throughout the whole of the industry. It is not just a couple of malcontents; the entire industry is asking these very serious questions because it has severe doubts about the future of the major supporting organisations - the Agriculture Protection Board and the Department of Agriculture - which have been part of the backbone of agriculture in this State since their inception.

It is sensible for the Government to allow a select committee to look at that issue in an impartial way. It would not be something that was driven by only one side of the Parliament. It would be an all-party committee. The committee could come back and show the Government the results of its deliberations and say what it believed the Government should seriously consider. Such recommendations could be implemented progressively. I understand that all these things have budgetary implications, no matter who is in government. If a select committee looked at this matter, one side of the Parliament would not be able to say that the Government had done nothing about it and that it had all the answers. A select committee would be an opportunity for the Government to completely defuse the issue. It is a great idea that would achieve two aims. I would prefer that the Government was on the political hot seat on this matter, but we cannot play politics with something as important as this industry. For that reason I strongly support the motion.

MR R.N. SWEETMAN (Ningaloo) [5.02 pm]: I support the motion moved by my colleague and endorsed by the National Party speakers. A select committee would serve a very useful purpose. Not only primary and agricultural producers - particularly people within the horticultural and grazing industries and the grain-growing districts - but also the Department of Agriculture are having a difficult time. A select committee would help us to distil some of the issues that are at work within the Department of Agriculture. I am not sure that the department is absolutely certain about the direction in which it is supposed to head or is being encouraged to head. I have the utmost confidence in Dr Graeme Robertson. I think he has offered leadership and direction to the industry for a long while. However, some within the agency have questioned his leadership, certainly during the six years I have been a member of Parliament. Dr Robertson continues at every forum at which I hear him speak to deliver a very up-beat and bullish message on behalf of Western Australian agricultural producers. I think that to some extent a philosophical battle is taking place within the Department of Agriculture - perhaps between the wets and the dries - as to exactly what the department should be involved in, particularly the extent to which it should be involved in industry. I think that a battle is taking place over whether the department should take a hands-on approach to try to steer or give further direction to sections of the industry or whether it should simply have a policing and monitoring role and direct people to expertise that is clearly - although not freely - available within the private sector of this State and this nation. I have on occasion been concerned that the Department of Agriculture has acted as an extension of the advocacy groups of agricultural producers. I do not think that has been helpful to the industry. In some sections, the department has developed a more dependent, welfare-type attitude. Industry has benefited from that, as has the Department of Agriculture in that it has created jobs based on three or five-year contracts. We are now seeing much displacement within the Department of Agriculture. I think the figures cited were that the number of full-time equivalents has been reduced from 1 600 to 1 400 over the past two to four years. Many of those people simply have not been redeployed when their contracts have fallen due. That is because a specific program was put in place and they were employed to work on that program to its conclusion. When the term of the program was completed, additional funds were not available for the development of new programs or the extension of the existing program, and the staff were not deployed within the agency, whether in the South Perth office or one of the regions. That to a large extent is the reason for the reduction of full-time equivalents within the Department of Agriculture.

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For the relatively short time I was opposition spokesperson for agricultural issues, agriculture appeared to me to be an industry that, despite its problems in certain areas, offered a lot of excitement. There is a lot of opportunity within all the agricultural sectors, particularly in grain growing, the production of various wool fibres to supply niche markets, the increasing prevalence of fat-tail sheep within the pastoral industry and the extension of the cattle herd. Cattle are as far south on the pastoral rangeland as they have ever been. It is interesting to look at some of the adjustments and adaptations that have taken place within all sectors of agriculture as primary producers try to cope with the new business and trading environment they find themselves in.

I always get anxious when I go to meetings. The opposition spokesperson, the member for Warren-Blackwood, was at the Pastoralists and Graziers Association meeting at Mt Magnet on Friday with me and the Leader of the Opposition. It was a very interesting forum that was well represented by PGA delegates from most parts of the southern, western and eastern pastoral regions. They were very forthright in many of the views they put forward. The meeting ended with several motions put forward by the various PGA divisions relating primarily to dividing fences. At times there was fierce debate over dividing fences. This has come about as a consequence of several growers within the various districts moving into different breeds of sheep, particularly damaras. There is great angst within the wool-growing section of the pastoral industry that cross-contamination will occur; that is, that damara hairs, which are very coarse fibres, will mix with other fleeces. That could happen by the fibres being picked up off the rangeland and lodged within the merino fleeces, or by the damara rams, which do not seem to have much respect for fences, getting through the fences and breeding with merino ewes. A six-metre fence is needed to stop damaras getting through. Interbred sheep tend to produce a fairly ordinary strain of wool that does not have much commercial value.

There is a lot of angst about some of the changes taking place within the industry. A select committee would be very handy, as it could go through the farming and pastoral areas to gather evidence about whether the Department of Agriculture can play an additional role in the facilitation and bedding down of some of the different means that primary producers are using to become more viable. The damaras are just one of those examples. In the pastoral regions it is not just the introduction of cattle and the variety of breeds of cattle, but the fat-tailed sheep, or the damaras, that are helping farms to become more viable. Apart from that, there is now more and more dependence - as was mentioned earlier in the debate - on rangeland goats, which used to be and are still called feral goats. I now understand that they are not far away from becoming authorised stock. Mr Acting Speaker, you would be interested to know that only five years ago we were paying vast sums of money to eradicate these feral animals under the goat eradication program. They are now selling for huge sums. There is a gross undersupply of these feral goats in the world market. It is said that Middle East countries in particular only buy our sheep because we do not produce enough goats for them. That is how much demand there is for these goats.

Mr M.P. Whitely: I believe it is worth \$30 million to your region.

Mr R.N. SWEETMAN: I would be surprised if it was not worth something around that figure. The average price a head in the season just past has been \$30 a head for a dressed carcass of plus-19 kilograms. That is an extraordinary figure. About \$6 a head can be made from feral goats, which makes it a very profitable sideline for pastoralists to be involved in. These animals are exceptionally good doers and breeders. For many of the pastoralists in the Murchison, Meekatharra and Gascoyne rangelands, whose areas are still being ravaged by drought, these rangeland goats are still doing very well. Even though there is not a lot of pasture or fodder on the ground, these goats are very good doers, and they are very creative. It is not unusual when driving along some bush tracks to see a goat perched up in a carrara or a wattle tree; that is how good they are at foraging. Therefore, they tend not to waste away like sheep do. Twelve months after a farmer has destocked his place of sheep, he will still have feral goats doing extremely well on the rangeland. The goats then come into various water points, where a natural drafting process occurs through total grazing management traps. Some goats are redirected into other paddocks, some are corralled and then trucked out to live shippers or to the abattoirs at Geraldton Meat Exporters Pty Ltd or places like that. I know that for much of the season just past those goats were being purchased on property for \$34 and \$35 a head, which is an extraordinary figure. There is a property down the road from Carnarvon that was destocked of sheep in November 2001. It exported or turned off 11 000 goats the year before last, and has just turned off nearly 8 000 goats in the past season at an average cost per head of \$27.50. That property has done extremely well for having no stock on the place and just turning off goats. That is how much initiative these pastoralists have demonstrated to become viable in difficult times and during this drought; they simply make the most of their resources.

I will finish on the issue of the Department of Agriculture. I am not sure that this is information that has been readily disseminated from the department through industry, not just the farming industry but also the pastoral and the horticultural industries. However, education is becoming more and more critical in primary production. For too long we have assumed that by having good agricultural colleges we will turn out graduates who have not

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just the practical skills but also the intellectual skills to take the industry to the next level. My observations are that that will not work. The Department of Agriculture is an important, genuine and vital service to all those segments of industry. I became very concerned and made several calls to the universities and, in particular, the University of Western Australia to track over a period how many students had majored in the agriculture sciences. It is a horror story. Not many students are taking agricultural units at a tertiary level and there were only about four graduates last year. It is quite alarming that a major university like UWA would turn out only four graduates who had chosen to work in the industry. I do not think the university had tracked them back into industry to determine whether they had gone to work for private enterprise or for the public sector or as the owner-operator of a farm. A new professor who was employed at the university prior to Christmas last year intends to crank up the agricultural sciences within UWA. From reviewing the situation, he said it was clear that the university was receiving enough applications from people wanting to go into the agricultural sciences but under an education path - I think it is called streaming - they would involve the essential components or units in economics and plant and animal sciences. However, after two years under this streaming program they move into the industry-related areas of those agricultural sciences or onto a career path that ultimately sees them studying native flora and fauna rather than the agricultural sciences to the point where they can provide services and intellectual capacity back to industry. The students were tending to go off and work for the Department of Conservation and Land Management or private consultancies to provide advice to large mining companies and those types of things. This is not really having the desired effect. Without improving the education and the intellectual capacity within every segment of the industry, it will not evolve as it needs to in order to hold its place as a producer of wealth, not just through providing produce for this country but through exports to various international markets. It needs to get wealth back into this country and to provide opportunities in those countries to which we export.

I have taken great heart in the past couple of days. I note that the Kondinin Group did not go into receivership; it managed to raise sufficient funds to remain viable. I am sure there are sections of the industry that will be disappointed as well as some that will be rejoicing in the fact that the group remained viable. The various groups and the different reports produced by various sections of industry are in many ways showing the way. The Department of Agriculture is criticised for many of the things that it has not done. However, groups like the Kondinin Group and reports such as the Kronis report and others being produced in the eastern States are giving the industry some direction. Industry does not have to take any notice of these reports or groups, but some sections of industry are becoming more and more dependent on this intelligence to make decisions on whether they stay in the industry or whether they expand, diversify or value add. It clearly demonstrates in great detail to industry what people should and could be doing within their industry segment.

A lot has been said about the Agriculture Protection Board. The previous coalition Government has been consistently criticised by industry since it brought about the changes to the APB, which basically corralled the APB - an almost autonomous agency within its own right - within Agriculture WA. I can recall four or five years ago being briefed on the proposed changes to the APB. There was no segment of industry or individuals within those segments that did not want some significant changes brought about within the APB. The coalition Government was encouraged to make those changes but sadly, when those changes were made, very few people supported them. There was an ongoing battle with industry groups over the performance of the Agriculture Protection Board.

A comment has been made about skeleton weed and things like that within the grain growing areas. Around my electorate and inland, the dogs are as close to out of control as they will ever get. It has always been said that once the dogs reach the coast, the fight will be lost and we will never get control of the dingoes again. I do not know whether that is true. The anecdotal evidence is that the dingoes are in greater numbers now than anyone in the pastoral industry can recall. Clearly there is a problem. For industry, the most obvious people to blame are those who restructured the Agriculture Protection Board and made it part of the Department of Agriculture. There may be insufficient resources for the board to do the job necessary to get on top of problems such as wild dogs and dingoes that are roaming pastoral areas. Changes have occurred in this State that would be picked up if a select committee were gathering evidence. In many areas, pastoralists have stepped back from what was a shared responsibility of keeping on top of not just the problem of wild dogs but also noxious weeds. Mesquite thorn and, of late, tamarisk trees and plants of that nature are becoming entrenched in many prime grazing areas within the range lands because of the encroachment of cattle. As I said earlier, cattle now graze as far south in the rangeland as they have ever done. It is very difficult for the dogs to bring down cattle. Although packs of dogs have been known to bring down newly born calves, it does not happen all that often. Pastoralists have stopped producing sheep and are now grazing cattle, therefore they have tended to let go whatever commitment they had to dogging on their property. As a result, the dogs have bred more and more and have moved through the various pastoral properties. The consequences of that are manifest if a neighbouring property predominantly produces sheep. Vast numbers of sheep will be lost as a result of invasion by those dogs across properties.

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That highlights the fact that, apart from pastoralists stepping back from responsibilities that they readily accepted in years gone by, they now prevaricate and claim that because they are paying double the APB levy than they used to pay, someone else should do the work on their behalf. It is a considerable levy. I think it is \$1 600 for each of the 550 pastoral leases. Whether the levy is used to eradicate weeds or dingoes on pastoral properties, \$1 600 does not get a lot of action. That is why pastoralists and government must make a concerted effort rather than bucket the APB and the Department of Agriculture for not combating this shared problem. A select committee could draw together those two fields of expertise so that we can all resolve this problem in the interests of the industry in its totality.

I will not seek an extension of time because I am aware that other people want to speak on this motion. I support the motion and I would be very pleased to participate in a select committee. I hope the parliamentary secretary has taken the matter to the minister and the minister is considering it favourably.

MR J.P.D. EDWARDS (Greenough) [5.24 pm]: I also support this extremely good motion. The Government should give it due consideration. Like the member Warren-Blackwood, I was going to give my credentials in the agriculture area. Perhaps the term qualifications would be better than credentials. I was involved in farming from childhood until I was about 22 years old. They were probably some of the best years of my life, although admittedly in another country far removed from here, but which faces similar issues. The divide between country and metropolitan people to which the member for Warren-Blackwood referred is a very palpable one. That is not necessarily by the design of people living in metropolitan areas. I am sure that they have as much interest in country pursuits as do country people in metropolitan pursuits; the difference being that, in many cases, country people live and operate under much more trying conditions than do people in the metropolitan area. Sadly, in the United Kingdom that has become almost an us and them situation. It would be terribly sad to see that situation arise here in Western Australia. I do not think it will because for us, agriculture is a major part of our industry and our economy. There is no doubt that this is a very diverse agricultural nation, particularly this State. What we used to term agricultural has now changed markedly from the days of wheat and sheep. Western Australians now farm horticulture across the board, including grapes, potatoes, olives and fruit - anything that grows in the ground and makes a dollar. In the past, that very good organisation, the Department of Agriculture, could always assist in providing necessary knowledge. It was very much looked upon by members of the agricultural community as their body, from which they could seek advice on any issue. The member for Warren-Blackwood, and perhaps a couple of others, referred to the changes we now face in this area. I can recall in my childhood days that when my father wanted advice he would phone the local Agriculture Department office and someone would be sent out within a day. The problem was discussed, a solution was found and we would move on. In those days the bank manager used to walk the farm to see whether we could match the budget the following year. How times have changed. That does not happen any more.

Other agencies now overarch the Department of Agriculture. It seems to have lost the thrust of its purpose. Its role is being taken over by the Department of Environmental Protection as well as other departments. That is to the detriment of the agricultural community. The Environmental Protection Authority is involved in pastoral leases and tourism issues that touch on pastoral leases, which traditionally have been part of the diversity that the farming and pastoral communities have seen as theirs.

Mr C.J. Barnett: That is a good point. Because of that, the Environmental Protection Authority is losing sight of some of the major environmental issues in the State. It is meddling in detail and losing sight of the big picture.

Mr J.P.D. EDWARDS: The Leader of the Opposition has raised a valid point. The member for Warren-Blackwood raised it in connection with land clearing. None of us wants to see land cleared. Farmers must manage their own destiny, so 99 per cent of farmers look after their land. It is their livelihood, so they do not want to muck it up. These days, with the best faith in the world, farmers are clearing land - the member for Cockburn will know what I am talking about because I am dealing with a particular issue in my electorate - yet the Environmental Protection Authority has said basically that they cannot do that. The point I am making is not so much on that issue but that other agencies are being given authority over a department that acted for farmers, was well respected by the farming community and was needed by the farming community. I do not believe that is the case any more. Unless we are very careful, the agricultural advice and help that has been available for years will no longer be there. As mentioned by the member for Ningaloo, farmers are looking at many issues, including dogs. They are an enormous problem, particularly in the north east wheatbelt. Emus are another problem. There is only one dogger in the State. Departments are currently trying to bring other people into the industry to control the dog situation. I remember driving along the emu-proof fence a few years ago; it was a dry year. There were up to 6 000 emus running along the fence. If the ones at the front are pushed by the ones at the back the fence will easily fall over. If the emus get into an agricultural area a farmer is faced with a problem. Emus will run over his crops. The crops probably cost \$1 million to put in. God knows what emus do to crops. The farmer has to obtain permission for a permit to shoot the emus. That has to go through the Department of

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Agriculture and the bureaucracy. The farmer has to buy a rifle and bullets. A rifle will cost a few thousand dollars and bullets cost about \$1.30 each. The cost should not be borne solely by the farmer. He is producing grain and stock that is vitally important to the economy of this State. There has to be some rationalisation and balance.

In talking about the diversity of farming today it is necessary that we have a body of people who can give the advice needed. The member for Ningaloo stated that he inquired at the University of Western Australia how many students were considering joining the Department of Agriculture or a similar department. He was told that only four were interested. That horrifies me. It means one of two things. There is either not enough interest in agriculture among young people, which I do not think is correct, or they are entering the private sector and joining agribusiness companies that obviously charge the farming community for their advice and problem solving. Having said that, farmers today are businessmen like anyone else. Farming is a high-tech business. The information they require is not just on the end of the telephone; it is often at the end of a computer link. A lot of the high technology is available through the Internet. There needs to be a balance. If formed, a select committee would be able to judge those sorts of bodies and areas of expertise.

The farming community has experienced three years of drought. It is hurting. My constituency covers the north east wheatbelt and the farmers in it need as much support as they can get. The situation requires understanding from other parts of the State. Metropolitan people must understand; the bureaucracy must understand. It cannot continue to put rules and regulations to the farming community when they are not suitable. The costs to the farming community are enormous. On the other hand, the benefits are enormous if farmers get good years. The benefits go to local business and local economies. The member for Wagin said it is a knock-on effect. If the farming community does not have good years it knocks on to businesses in regional areas, even to businesses in the city. It is vitally important that farmers receive advice and technical know-how and all that entails from a good Department of Agriculture. I am conscious that the department has been run down. I have the greatest respect for Dr Graeme Robertson; I met him the other day and found him particularly forward thinking. He is obviously a very good head of department. In Greenough the Agriculture Protection Board has been run down to such an extent that there is only one officer in the field. There may be a few people in the office at an administration level. The staff who handled skeleton weed, feral animals and the emu-proof fence have all gone. Someone else has to pick up the tab. If that does not happen it shows neglect and a lack of concern. That is a worry. Those are the sorts of issues for a select committee.

The member for Roe mentioned Johnne's disease. How well is it being handled? I can tell the House a very sad story from my part of the world about a farming couple whose property has just been put into quarantine for three years. The couple have owned their farm for 10 years. Their animals represent one of the largest gene pools for Angora goats in Australia. Two of them apparently have Johnne's disease. There are questions whether the department has got it right. I say that carefully because I believe it is important that when one plays with people's lives and finances, the department needs to be very sure it has it right. I draw the attention of the House to what happened in the United Kingdom. Several years ago there was an outbreak of foot and mouth disease. The Government of the day, which is still in power, destroyed the farming industry of the United Kingdom. That has been generally recognised. The Government destroyed any animal that had the remotest possibility of foot and mouth disease. In hindsight, it has been admitted it was not necessary to do so. I do not believe the farming industry in the United Kingdom will survive that. It has been made a secondary industry and the United Kingdom will depend on other countries for its food. I would hate to see that happen here. It is an issue that needs to be looked at and clarified. The couple I have just mentioned are looking at bankruptcy because there is no compensation and nothing they can do. They have been hand feeding their animals and have an incredibly large overdraft. Johnne's disease and footrot are the sorts of conditions that could be looked at by the select committee.

The motion is very good and I strongly support it. The agriculture industry in this State is second to none and we must keep it as one of our prime industries.

MR B.J. GRYLLS (Merredin) [5.39 pm]: It is great to have the opportunity to speak on the motion of the member for Warren-Blackwood. It is very clear from the debate so far that there is a lot of passion for agriculture in this House. I am sure that that passion is felt by members on both sides of the House. It is also very clear that it is time for a new direction. It is clear that times have changed in agriculture and that in order to keep up with those changing times, the Department of Agriculture must be aware of and reflect those changes and must capture the imagination of those involved in agriculture so that they can be regarded as relevant and important as we go forward. One of the great challenges to enable the Department of Agriculture to do that is funding, but I will leave that for another day because it takes us into the political side of the argument. I would rather concentrate on the other side of the argument; that is, how do we get the best value out of the dollars that are spent on the Department of Agriculture, how do we ensure that the Department of Agriculture remains relevant and helps take agriculture in Western Australia into the new century, and how do we capitalise on the

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opportunities in this new market that exist for Western Australia? That is the crux of what we are trying to achieve. I am sure there is no argument on that point. That is what makes this motion of the member for Warren-Blackwood so important. He is saying let us step back from Parliament and the politics of this issue and form a select committee that will look closely at the Department of Agriculture and how we can take it forward. The parliamentary secretary has indicated that he will not support the motion. However, if he wants to do justice to that role, it is incumbent on him as the parliamentary secretary to recognise these issues, and I am sure he does. In the conversations that I have had with him, he has indicated that he is aware of and agrees with the issues I have raised. We need to get this right.

In 1829 when people first came to Western Australia, how did Western Australia grow? How did we end up where we are today? I will tell members how we ended up where we are today. The first settlers landed on the coast and they packed their bags and went inland to develop agriculture. The development of agriculture in the past century is the reason we are here. That is why we have roads and freeways and parks in the city. The money from agriculture has been brought back to the coast. The development of agriculture has seen Perth become one of the greatest cities in the world. I am sure everyone agrees with that.

The problem at the moment is that the past 100 years of development have seen many changes. Now we need to go forward in the next 100 years and capitalise on the next lot of growth opportunities. Can we do it? Can we go the next step and take advantage of those opportunities? We took advantage of them in the past 100 years by putting the money, the expertise and the political will behind agriculture to make it happen. That is why C.Y. O'Connor had the money to take water to the towns in regional areas, that is why money was spent on roads, that is why the Agriculture Protection Board was formed, and that is why Co-operative Bulk Handling Ltd ensured there was a viable bulk-handling system in the regions so that the wheat industry could grow. That is why these boards, the expertise and the people went into regional Western Australia, developed the industry and made Western Australia the great prosperous State it is today.

At the start of a new century, we find ourselves at another crossroad. It is like going back 100 years. We need to reinvigorate the agriculture industry. If we do that, we can return the dividends we have seen in the past 100 years. This is a great challenge for not only country members of Parliament but also the whole Parliament. Agriculture, mining, forestry and fisheries are the primary industries that built this State. At the moment, the mining industry is going ahead at 1 000 miles an hour because it has adopted new technologies, taken up the challenge of supplying the markets that are there and value added. The \$25 million gas deal on the North West Shelf is an absolutely huge bonus for this State. It will help this State go into the next 100 years confident that it can keep growing. It is the same with viticulture. I spoke to the member for Warren-Blackwood about it earlier in the day. Viticulture has managed to capture a market and now Western Australian viticulture is regarded all over the world as a market leader. We are charging triple the world price for a bottle of wine produced in the Margaret River, great southern and Swan Valley regions.

Mr B.K. Masters: Especially the Margaret River region!

Mr B.J. GRYLLS: Exactly.

Mr R.C. Kucera: If that is what you believe, why is it then that your party has pushed the live sheep industry so much and has gotten rid of all the value adding that was going on before that?

Mr B.J. GRYLLS: I am happy to take that interjection. The industry would welcome being able to process that product and export it as a value-added product. The problem is that we are still developing that market. At the moment, the buyers of the live sheep want them to kill; they want live sheep. That is the market. There is no way that anyone from the National Party would not want to export a value-added product. Abattoirs right across the State are under-utilised. That is not exactly what we want to happen, but the trouble is that currently the customers are demanding live sheep because that is how they want to take that product according to their culture. Obviously it is far better for the State, the abattoirs and everybody to do as much processing here as we can. We work continuously with the abattoirs to try to make that happen, but we cannot just chop it off and start again straightaway. That is exactly where we are trying to go. The last thing we need to do is export a product from Western Australia for \$50 a head if we can export it for \$150 a head. In my business we used to turn the wheat that we grew on our property into flour, which I have exported to the United Kingdom for \$2 000 a tonne instead of \$200 a tonne.

Mr R.C. Kucera: I thank you for that view because it is a question that troubles me greatly, having seen the industry that we did have unravel.

Mr B.J. GRYLLS: It has unravelled because that is the market. If we can change that market, obviously that is what we will try to do. However, it would be crazy to lose that market if there were no replacement.

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Mr R.C. Kucera: I have no argument with that, but I thank you for answering the question. The reason I asked is that recently a delegation from Indonesia was talking about health standards in relation to that matter. I am hoping that from that, we can start to do some of that value adding.

Mr B.J. GRYLLS: It is certainly something that I welcome.

I return to the point that I was trying to make. We are on the cusp of a new era in agriculture. Either we can get it right or we can get it wrong. If we get it wrong, Western Australian agriculture will become like agriculture the world over, in which peasants produce low-value products and do not make a viable go of it. At the end of the day the farmers in Mexico, Russia and other developing countries will produce the lowest cost product because that is what they do. Western Australia cannot have the cheapest product because it does not have the lowest wages or the cheapest freight or port costs. That is because we have a higher standard of living, and that is something that makes Western Australia a great place. We will not be the lowest cost producer of products. We need to start aiming for the top end of the market, and that is the great challenge we need to face.

I return to the motion of the member for Warren-Blackwood. That is what this debate is all about. It seeks to establish a select committee to look at agriculture and at the way the state executive of agriculture, the Department of Agriculture, leads that charge. As I discussed with the member for Cockburn earlier today, because the Department of Agriculture is being constricted and the intellectual capital is moving out to the private sector, at the moment more and more Western Australian farmers are turning away from the Department of Agriculture and are looking to private enterprise. We are seeing groups such as the Facey Group in Wickiepin, the Liebe Group in Buntine and the Mingenew-Irwin Group in the north springing up all over the regions. These groups are the younger generation of innovative farmers who have come together and said that this is what they want from their body to take agriculture forward.

If there were a blueprint for the way in which the Department of Agriculture should operate, we could probably look no further than to the innovative groups of young producers who have come together and are doing it themselves. I refer to grain production in my area, but I am sure that the same innovative groups of young producers exist in the wool, lamb, beef and viticulture industries. They are fighting the battle for themselves. The State must supply the resources for the Department of Agriculture and it must direct the department to reflect the needs of the new century. I will not take up any more time, because I look forward to hearing what the member for Cockburn has to say. He has indicated that he will not support the motion to appoint a select committee to consider matters within the Department of Agriculture. However, I truly hope that he will do justice to his position and to that of the Minister for Agriculture. We are at a point at which we can take Western Australian agriculture forward. It will be up to the leaders of the community to decide how we do that. I have outlined that Western Australia can benefit by reinvigorating agriculture. I put on the record that 75 000 people in the 44 shires of the wheatbelt produce \$2.7 billion of the gross state product. Much of that comes into the wheatbelt but it gets back to the city. As I said, that has happened during the 170 years that WA has been a State. We grow it in the regions and it finds its way to the coast.

Most of Western Australia's developments are on the coast. In order for the coast to continue to grow, we must ensure that we reinvigorate the regions. We are seeing that happen on the North West Shelf. There has been corporate investment in the mining industry, which is producing untold benefits for the State. There has also been corporate investment in the viticulture industry in the south west, which has resulted in untold export income and growth and regional growth in this State. The wheatbelt area - the area for which the department is broadly responsible - has not had that reinvigoration and has not had the same growth. It experienced a tough drought last year. However, over the past 50 years the line on the graph has been pointing down. It is a real challenge for not only me, as a local member of Parliament for the wheatbelt, but also everybody in this House to find out what is going on, to consult with the community and to arrive at a visionary plan that will move agriculture forward. If we do not do that, many people will be losers and they will be not just those directly involved in agriculture.

MR B.K. MASTERS (Vasse) [5.54 pm]: About 10 years ago, the head of the Department of Agriculture in Busselton was a well-respected and competent agricultural scientist by the name of John Wise. One day he received a phone call from a farmer who asked if he would come out to her property to look at a pasture problem that she was experiencing. He told her "Sorry madam, the new departmental policy states that I must decline visiting individual farmers, because, as an employee of the department involved in extension work, I can meet only with groups of farmers". I could tell another story about that matter. However, the bottom line is that the farmer was so upset about that accurate description of departmental policy at the time that she phoned the head office in Perth, complained about the new policy and explained how she found out about it. Two days later, John Wise was disciplined for having passed on departmental policies to that farmer. Shortly thereafter, John Wise resigned from the department and is now a competent and respected consultant operating out of the south west. I have told that story to highlight the fact that significant changes have been made to the way in which the

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Department of Agriculture has done its job over recent years. Unfortunately, the farmers - the people to whom the department should provide its various services - have not been included in the change of direction that the department has taken over that time. The department heads in Perth clearly had an understanding of where they wanted to go. However, they did not communicate that particularly well to their regional staff. In turn, the farmers in the south west - I cannot speak for farmers anywhere else in the State - were not aware of the direction in which the department was heading and of the effect that the changes would have. That is one difficulty that I see with the Department of Agriculture as it currently exists. For that reason, I am pleased to support the call by the member for Warren-Blackwood for a select committee that will look into the Department of Agriculture and the Agriculture Protection Board.

I will tell a few more little stories to highlight the range of problems that exist within the department. Clearly there are many good things I could say; however, it is appropriate that I try to give the parliamentary secretary a reasonable indication of where the problems lie. Hopefully I will be able to convince him of the need for a select committee. A friend of mine was doing some work at the South Perth headquarters of the Department of Agriculture. I was given the following description as being the general working schedule for certain researchers working in a particular part of the Department of Agriculture in South Perth. A group of the researchers would arrive at roughly 9.30 am. After a cup of tea, a bit of a natter and a check of the newspaper, they would start work around about 10.00 am. They would break for lunch at 12 noon and return to work at 1.00 pm. They would have an afternoon cup of tea at about 3.00 pm and then go home at 4.00 pm.

Mr R.C. Kucera: That sounds a bit like the upper House!

Mr B.K. MASTERS: I have told that story not because I know the people involved and want to criticise them. I told that story because there is a perception that some staff within the Department of Agriculture lead a very comfortable life with low stress and reduced working hours. Whether that is true is not the point. It may well be that those researchers come back at night to do certain experimental procedures that cannot be done during the day. Perhaps they come back on weekends, or maybe they otherwise fill in the hours and do their job efficiently and satisfactorily. I do not know the circumstances. However, if I am told, as a member of Parliament, that there is a real or perceived problem with researchers employed by the Department of Agriculture because they work barely five hours a day, get away with it and have no supervision of any significance, that indicates that there is a problem within the department. A select committee with representatives from both sides of this House would have the opportunity to understand whether the situation I outlined is real or perceived, and, if it is real, what can be done about it.

I turn now to a third story. Before entering Parliament, I was a consultant. One of the jobs I worked on was trying to gain environmental approval for a group of farmers to mine gypsum from an A-class nature reserve at Lake Chinicup, which is in the Shire of Kent. I think it was a three-year battle to get that approval, but it may have been longer. Even after the approval came through, gypsum mining did not start for another couple of years. It was a five-year effort for those farmers to realise what they had been hoping to achieve. When the environmental approval was finally obtained in about 1995-96, almost immediately the Department of Agriculture announced that there would be a new research program valued at \$700 000 over a five-year period to allow a departmental researcher to prove that when it was applied to certain clay-rich soils in that part of the world called moort soils, gypsum changed the chemistry of the soils to the extent that there was significant improvement in water infiltration, and, therefore, significant improvement in productivity. The farmers I was working with in the Lake Chinicup area were absolutely outraged that \$700 000 of taxpayers' funds was to be spent on this research project. They were outraged for two reasons. The first is that farmers in South Australia and Western Australia have over 20 years experience of applying gypsum to clay-rich soils, knowing that it makes huge improvements to the agricultural productivity of the land. The need to do that research simply did not exist. Worse than that, if the Department of Agriculture had \$700 000 spare, it could have put a fraction of that money into assisting those farmers to get the approvals they needed to allow mining to occur at Lake Chinicup, so that the farmers could use that gypsum and for the first time apply integrated catchment management. In other words, they could do a really good job of looking after their land at the same time as they were looking after the environment. This story was about misapplied research funding. There may well be other stories, but that is one that came home to me.

The final story I will tell relates to an issue I have been concerned about for a number of years: the amount of money that state government agencies are able to get from the federal Government via the Natural Heritage Trust. The trust amounts to millions and millions of dollars every year, and it has done this for six to 10 years. It strikes me as somewhat surprising that, no matter what the circumstances of the guidelines laid down by the federal Government, about 50 per cent of the national Landcare program, or more recently Natural Heritage Trust money, goes to State Governments. The Department of Agriculture is one of the major beneficiaries of some of those funding initiatives. Many of the programs funded by the NHT should be considered as core activities that should be funded by the State Government rather than by the federal Government. In other words,

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while the federal Government puts forward tens of millions of dollars to try to achieve significant improvements through Landcare to salinity, the environment and a whole range of issues on the ground, state government agencies, including the Department of Agriculture, come in and divert that money for projects that should be state responsibilities. All the stories I have told relate in one way or another to the Department of Agriculture and the need for a select committee. Some of the stories I have told go back at least 10 years, as does the need for a select committee.

Most of the Margaret River winegrowing area is within the Vasse electorate, because most of the vineyards are in the Busselton shire. My electorate is very important for viticulture, dairying - there are more dairy farmers in the Vasse electorate than in any other area of the State - general grazing, floriculture - proteas are grown on about half a dozen farming properties - and potato production. Vasse produces \$50 million or \$60 million worth of agricultural produce each year. However, while these significant changes have been occurring over the past few years, people like John Wise, Bevan Kingdon, Steve Hossen and Ken Hayward have left the Department of Agriculture. All those people I mentioned were employees of the Department of Agriculture in Busselton at middle or upper management level who left the department and are now working as very good consultants in a wide range of agricultural fields. That, in itself, should have set off alarm bells in the department in that these agricultural scientists, who are among the very best and certainly among the most experienced and most competent, were leaving the department to go off and become consultants in a region in which agriculture was significantly changing. It appears to me that farmers and individual agricultural scientists such as the ones I mentioned were able to accommodate the change, but the Department of Agriculture was the one body that could not accommodate the change and could not get its mind around what the future meant and, therefore, what processes and procedures needed to be put in place. I repeat that the establishment of this select committee is long overdue.

The second part of the motion moved by the member for Warren-Blackwood relates to the Agriculture Protection Board. I will mention two people. Hal Scott is a local farmer who has been very active in agriculture protection matters for many years and Simon Merewether is a Department of Agriculture employee based in Bunbury who has significant responsibility for agriculture protection activities. Both those people - I hope this does not come back to cause Simon any difficulties - have expressed to me the frustrations they have encountered in recent years in trying to achieve good outcomes; good in the sense that taxpayers' dollars are wisely spent and good in the sense that the land, the agricultural productivity and the agricultural base of the south west corner that I represent is protected in a fair and reasonable way.

In the past few years there has been a reduction in funding, which was limited to start with anyway. The bottom line is that Hal Scott is a farmer, and therefore a direct beneficiary of agricultural protection activities and Simon Merewether is a person who was employed to achieve on-the-ground agricultural improvements. Both of them explained to me the difficulties they faced in achieving what they were hoping to achieve.

A major concern of Hal Scott's was that as changes have occurred within the agricultural protection side of the Department of Agriculture, farmers to a large degree have been left out on a limb. As changes have occurred to the way in which the department does things, those farmers have not been involved in setting priorities or even in providing advice to the department. Again, that has led to a significant amount of frustration for farmers. My predecessor, Barry Blaikie, had many problems trying to get information from the department on how much money would be needed if all the government agencies in the south west contributed the money that was needed to protect agriculture against the various types of agricultural pest plants, such as weeds and so on. He finally got a figure some six or seven years ago that indicated \$60 million would be needed to control or eliminate from certain areas blackberry, arum lilies, apple of Sodom - possibly not bridal creeper as that might be too recent an agricultural pest - and a range of agricultural pest plants. My understanding is that not even one-tenth of that amount of money has been provided in the past six to eight years.

Another source of frustration is that a review of Agriculture Protection Board plant categories was conducted to determine whether a plant needed to be classified as P1, P2, P3 or P4. The numbers refer to the classification; the higher the number, the lower the emphasis on control. Farmers in my electorate were upset that they were not directly involved in the reassessment of those priority categories. Even when they put in strong submissions that indicated better ways to resolve the various issues, their recommendations were not accepted.

[Leave granted for the member's time to be extended.]

Mr B.K. MASTERS: The final issue I will raise relates again to the Agriculture Protection Board and the use of 10,80 poison. I am not sure what the member for Warren-Blackwood had in mind when he put forward his motion, but both the Department of Agriculture and the Agriculture Protection Board have been severely constrained over the past four or five years in the way in which they can deal with matters relating to the use of 10,80 poison, or monosodium fluoroacetate, if members want the full scientific name.

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Mr P.D. Omodei: I know that.

Mr B.K. MASTERS: The member for Warren-Blackwood knew that. The reason for their frustration was primarily the changes in the Health Department's categorisation of 10,80. Almost without consultation with the wider community, the Health Department changed the rating or assessment of 10,80. Some four or five years ago it said that 10,80 was a far more dangerous and toxic poison than it ever imagined, and that it would apply far more severe constraints on it than were previously applied. I will briefly paint a picture. Prior to those changes, almost any landowner, group of landowners or group of people involved in nature conservation-type activities could, through an appropriate process, go to Department of Agriculture or Agriculture Protection Board officers and say that they wanted to lay poison eggs or meat baits in an area of bushland to try to control foxes and, to a lesser degree, feral cats. This flowed largely from the Western Shield initiative of Dr Syd Shea when he was head of the Department of Conservation and Land Management, which was designed to lower predator numbers within bushland areas of the south west of Western Australia, thereby reducing the pressure of predation on native animals such as numbats, woylies, wambengers, bandicoots such as quenda, and quokkas. Until those changes occurred within the Health Department, there was a cost effective and effective on-the-ground program of fox baiting.

As the consultation undertaken by the Health Department on the new regulations was poor, it took almost two years for the Department of Agriculture, through APB officers, to work out how to apply a new process to allow 10,80 poison to be made available for the continuation of the Western Shield program, mainly on private land. One thing changed; community groups could no longer apply for permission to be given 10,80 poison. It had to be an individual. That simple change, which I believe was totally unjustified, has basically destroyed community fox baiting in the south west of Western Australia. I have written to various ministers both of the previous and this Government to ask why these draconian changes were made. I asked how many people had been poisoned by 10,80 in recent memory. The department thought there had been two or three cases of poisoning, one of which it thought had been self-induced, or, in other words, was an attempted suicide. The bottom line is that the Department of Health or the Department of Agriculture could give me virtually no cases to justify these serious restraints on the availability of 10,80. When I then asked what were the other reasons for placing those constraints on 10,80, I was told that two or three farm or other dogs had been poisoned by 10,80 baits in areas of the south west over the years. I understand that the majority of these were not farm dogs that were poisoned by baits that had been moved from an area of bushland onto a farming property but were domestic dogs that were taken for a stroll in bushland or national parks. Contrary to all the signs that informed people against taking their dogs into the bushland, dog owners walked their dogs in those areas where the dogs ate poisoned bait and died. However, they are totally unacceptable reasons for placing these very severe constraints on the availability of 10,80.

I must commend two Agriculture Protection Board officers who have been based in Busselton over the past few years, Phil Williams and Tony Pocock. They have been very professional and extremely helpful in trying to work with me in my capacity as a landowner to poison foxes on a bush block I own in the Shire of West Arthur and in their dealings with other farmers in the Vasse electorate. Although they have been very helpful, they have been severely constrained by what I consider dumb and unjustified new restrictions that the Department of Health has placed on them.

All those things indicate that there are many problems within the Department of Agriculture, including the agricultural protection division. I will not repeat the five points that the member for Warren-Blackwood raised in the motion outlining the areas he believes the select committee must investigate. I hope that no member in this place has any doubt that I believe the committee process is long overdue. I hope that the Government will support the motion.

MR F.M. LOGAN (Cockburn - Parliamentary Secretary) [6.17 pm]: I respond to the motion on behalf of the Government. The Government will oppose the motion moved by the shadow Minister for Agriculture to establish a select committee to review the operations of the Department of Agriculture. I willingly recognise the knowledge and experience of those members who spoke about agriculture. They are far more knowledgeable and experienced than I am. The member for Warren-Blackwood summarised my knowledge and experience of agriculture fairly well. I acknowledge his and his family's knowledge, experience and emotional attachment to the land.

Mr M.P. Whitely interjected.

Mr F.M. LOGAN: The member for Roleystone referred to potatoes. The member for Warren-Blackwood said that he came into Parliament as a humble potato farmer. However, when he said that, he did not acknowledge my interjection. I asked whether he would leave the Parliament as a very wealthy grape grower.

Mr P.D. Omodei: I doubt it.

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Mr F.M. LOGAN: I will respond to the motion that deals with five areas of inquiry in the following manner. Firstly, I will deal with the structure and future direction of the Department of Agriculture and the Agriculture Protection Board of Western Australia and the demand for a select committee to oversee the future direction of the Department of Agriculture. The structure of the Department of Agriculture was reorganised in 2002 to improve the management and accountability of all aspects of the department. That reorganisation was undertaken after a year-long review of its operations. The review resulted in a strategic plan, which has been implemented.

Members opposite called for the department to examine itself by looking at the way it does business and assists agriculture and persons involved in agriculture. That has been done. It was done last year. The Agriculture Protection Board is being amalgamated into the Department of Agriculture. The members who raised those criticisms need to be patient and watch that restructuring take place as a result of the implementation of the strategic review undertaken in 2001. They will see the fruits of that restructure as that strategic review comes into place. That started last year and will continue in future years.

One of the key changes effected as part of the structural review was stronger departmental integration of biosecurity, natural resource management and industry productivity and improvement. That change has ensured that, rather than the department providing unstructured responses to immediate issues, all developmental advice and regulatory actions are carried out in a way that considers all the issues facing the agricultural sector. Most members opposite who have contributed to this debate have much greater experience than I in this House and certainly in matters agricultural. They have a greater knowledge of the relationship between the industry and the Department of Agriculture. Those members would know that the Department of Agriculture structured issues such as biosecurity, environment, industry productivity and improvement and research and technology into separate boxes. There was no interrelationship between those sections of the department. Members are aware of the history of the development of the Department of Agriculture. Agriculture does not work like that. It cannot be categorised into separate boxes. We cannot take environment away from agriculture. We cannot take productivity away from the processes of agriculture itself. We cannot say that the issue of biosecurity does not apply to certain sections of agriculture. They are all interrelated because of the way in which farms, pastoral stations, dairy farms and other forms of agriculture work. The strategic review of the Department of Agriculture identified how the department must operate to provide effective services to agriculture.

Another key change the department has implemented is the establishment of effective industry and regional consultative mechanisms. One of the criticisms put forward by the member for Warren-Blackwood was that the department has lost its way with industry consultation. Things have changed since the days of consultation at the gate. A number of the examples given involved a farmer ringing the Department of Agriculture and somebody coming out to the farm to provide advice on a particular problem. That has changed. The member knows that has changed. It changed not under our Government but under the member's Government. It has been changing for a long time. The change is a move toward the more effective use of resources within the Department of Agriculture.

Our Government approaches all issues, whether it be agriculture, road construction, the forestry industry restructure or industry development, in a consultative manner. We take into account the views of the community and all stakeholders involved in a particular decision-making process. That theory and policy is being driven through government agencies, and the Department of Agriculture is no different. The consultative mechanisms that are being put in place by the Department of Agriculture as a result of the strategic review will overcome the issues the member for Warren-Blackwood raised about the lack of consultation. However, consultation will not be carried out in the same manner it was years ago. It cannot because the world has moved on. Those consultative mechanisms will ensure that industry has a better understanding of the core business of the Department of Agriculture and is able to better influence the future direction of the department's activities. These structures will provide better feedback from the department to industry and vice versa.

One of the key objectives of the Department of Agriculture is to focus on the sustainability of farming and agriculture. That is one of the key issues that have come out of the strategic review of the Department of Agriculture and it is a key policy initiative of the Labor Government. Sustainability is one of the driving factors of this Government's decision-making process and, quite rightly, it is now built into the decision-making processes of the Department of Agriculture. The department is now focusing on sustainability as being at the core of its decision-making processes, and for good reason. It is one thing to look at the profitability of an operation, but profitability must not be at the expense of the environment that supports the agricultural base.

Although the member for Warren-Blackwood said that it has never been the case and that people who farm the land have always had an inherent knowledge of and relationship with the land, which has meant they have not had an impact on the land or undermined the environmental condition of the land, one has only to go to the

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Murchison region to see that that has not been the case. Members in this place cannot put their hand on their heart and say that agriculture has not had an effect on places such as the Murchison region. It has had a major effect on many areas. Anybody who has anything to do with the pastoral and agricultural industries knows that farming in the Murchison region has had a huge effect. We must ask whether those pastoralists took those issues into account when they ran sheep on their stations. Did they worry about them or did they try to get the most out of their station by stocking the station with those numbers of sheep?

Mr P.D. Omodei: That is a bit unfair. The Agriculture Protection Board was killing 90 000 goats a year because goats and donkeys were having an effect on the land.

Mr F.M. LOGAN: I would not disagree that goats were having an effect, but that was in the days when the APB was, as the member has pointed out, having a major impact on the goats. However, there were significant numbers of sheep. The member cannot deny they have had an effect. One has only to drive through the place to see that the land is very slowly returning to something of the order that it was before.

The previous Government initiated the integration of the Agriculture Protection Board into the Department of Agriculture. In 2001 the Machinery of Government Task Force confirmed this action and concluded that the establishment of a larger government department would improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the public sector in general and the Department of Agriculture in particular. The member for Warren-Blackwood has indicated that he was unaware of the development of the agriculture management Bill. I point out to the member that I raised the agriculture management Bill during the Estimates Committee last year when it was dealing with the agricultural, forestry and fisheries portfolio. When I was representing the minister, I was subjected to a fair amount of criticism by members opposite about the funding of the Agriculture Protection Board. I pointed out that the future of the work of the APB within the new Department of Agriculture was under review, as was the Act, as part of an overall review of all the Acts governing agriculture. I pointed out that industry associations were in consultation with the Government over the review of those Acts. The consequence of that review is the development of the proposed agriculture protection Bill.

That Bill will enable the full integration of the Agriculture Protection Board with the Department of Agriculture. Following the enactment of the proposed Bill, the Agriculture Protection Board Act 1950 will be repealed and the board will cease to exist as a statutory authority. The Department of Agriculture will then establish a committee to provide advice on biosecurity needs and protection issues. Also, as part of putting together the Bill dealing with the Agriculture Protection Board, there has been a full review of 14 pieces of agricultural legislation, some of which are the oldest pieces of legislation developed in Western Australia. It is certainly more than necessary to have those reviewed. That review was done in full consultation with industry groups. The Bill has now been approved for drafting and the Government may seek to introduce the Bill into the House next year.

In debate on the future direction of the board and government assistance from the Department of Agriculture, it was interesting to note the differences between opposition members over the future of any form of government assistance. It was interesting to note not only differences between the various parties but also within them. The member for Ningaloo seemed to be advocating less of a nanny-state approach to the support of agriculture by the Department of Agriculture, where assistance is given for all things whether they be weeds, animals, fences, technical advice or research. He also indicated that the private sector is playing a far more intensive role in financially investing in the agricultural industry. I note that the member for Ningaloo has been quite refreshing and controversial in his approach to matters agricultural. His arguments are quite refreshing, which is good to see because they encourage debate. Although his views may well be controversial, that is what is needed and he is doing a good job in stirring the pot on these issues.

I compare that member with the member for Warren-Blackwood who was quite rightly looking at the Department of Agriculture and the agricultural area in general through rose-coloured spectacles. He looked back at the golden age of how things were, how they should be and what the Government should do to support the industry and look after farmers. He picked up on a series of things that farmers have relied on the Government to do in the past. It is interesting to hear those different points of view. It is not unusual that they occur in this Parliament or that they come from the one party because they reflect the debate that is happening in the agricultural industry anyway. It is interesting to hear those different ideological points of view come through in the debate today.

I will turn to the second issue; that is, the funding of the Department of Agriculture by government and the private sector. Over the past 10 years funding to the Department of Agriculture has remained constant in nominal terms. The figures given to me by the department show from a comparison between the funding available this year as a result of last year's budget and the funding to the department in 1993 and 1990 that funding has gone up and down over that period. However, the level of funding this year is exactly the same as it was in 1993-94. Funding is about \$4 million behind where it was in 1990. I acknowledge that funding has gone

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up and come down again in the intervening period. However, it has remained in nominal terms relatively constant.

Funding for the Agriculture Protection Board, however, has declined marginally over that same period. I point out to the member for Warren-Blackwood - and it is a pity the member for Stirling is not in the Chamber - that it is particularly worth noting that during the eight years of the previous Government, funding for the Agriculture Protection Board declined by close to 15 per cent in real terms. Also, private sector funding for agriculture generally had positive rates of growth for the past five years. As was indicated by the member for Ningaloo, private sector funding has increased in excess of five per cent over this period. The relationship the department has with industry funding bodies is particularly strong because the Department of Agriculture has maintained a high standard of expertise and research and pursued priorities in line with industry needs. Although there is a greater need and priority for this Government in police, health and education, this Administration is committed to supporting agriculture, as will be evident in the budget tomorrow.

I now deal with the third point raised by the member for Warren-Blackwood; namely, whether the Department of Agriculture's responsibilities should be expanded or diminished. I did not hear the member answer that point.

Mr P.D. Omodei: If you had a private-public cooperative venture, some people may say that the Department of Agriculture's budget should be diminished in line with that proposal. We need to canvass that aspect.

Mr F.M. LOGAN: I acknowledge that the member is correct in his interjection. He did not get to that point in his motion, which is a pity because it would have added to the debate and added interest.

The review of the current agricultural legislation, as I indicated, has culminated in the proposed amendments to the Agriculture Act and the agriculture management Bill which will deal with the roles and responsibilities of agricultural agencies. I now raise one of the main reasons for opposing the motion and the select committee proposal: all members will have ample opportunity to consider all issues raised and to deal with criticisms of the department and the future of agriculture generally when the draft legislation is presented to Parliament. Therefore, it would be inappropriate and inefficient for a select committee to inquire into something that is about to be presented to Parliament for its full consideration.

In addition, I raise a number of key points that I recognise to be current drivers of investment by government in agriculture. The first matter is the long-term sustainable use of land, and the clear need to balance environmental and economic issues associated with agriculture's use of land and water resources. A number of individual issues and examples were raised in debate on the motion today. However, one cannot consider them in isolation, any more than one can consider people involved in farming in isolation from everything happening around them globally and locally. We must consider them in a total environmental, economic and social package.

The second issue is the biosecurity of the State. It is clear that much of the market benefits obtained by agriculture in this State are due to its freedom from pests and diseases. The third point is the profitability of the industry given the critical role agriculture has played and, as was pointed out by the member for Merredin, will continue to play in regional communities and economies. It is important that the profitability of agribusiness is strengthened through investment by the Government. This Government is committed to that. Criticisms have been made about the funding of the Department of Agriculture, which is the key justification for the select committee. However, as I said, broader issues are at stake such as sustainable issues that deal with social, environmental and economic impacts and how agriculture can survive and be profitable into the future while being involved with agencies and bodies beyond the Department of Agriculture. That is not what the select committee would focus on. It would focus on the department and its role. The point the Government is making is that its approach to sustainability involves areas beyond just the department and other agencies. The select committee would not examine that.

Mr P.D. Omodei: I beg to differ. The motion refers to connections with government and the private sector.

Mr F.M. LOGAN: The member for Greenough was right when he highlighted the impact of the drought and changes in agriculture on businesses outside agricultural-associated businesses. The Government's approach to sustainability deals with areas beyond the farm gates. It takes account of all the other issues that affect farmers, such as access to water, a point raised by the member for Warren-Blackwood, although it was a criticism about licence fees for dams. As the member for Warren-Blackwood knows, a very controversial matter in the south west is access to water and water rights. We must consider the changing nature of the environment. Last year was the hottest January on record, and the hottest January before that was the previous January. What can we expect next January and what are the implications for agriculture if that continues? That may well be associated with the greenhouse effect. All those issues must be taken into consideration. Transport, the general global environment, global markets, property rights, water rights and various other factors that are impacted on by the changing nature of agriculture must be considered in a whole-of-government approach to the future of

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agriculture. This motion deals only with a narrow area that primarily relates to the activities of the Department of Agriculture.

The fourth point I will address is whether there are any conflicts between the Department of Agriculture, the Agriculture Protection Board and other government departments. There are none that I am aware of. That issue was not addressed by the member for Warren-Blackwood, but it is referred to in the motion. There are no conflicts between the Department of Agriculture and the APB. The relationship has never been more constructive.

Mr P.D. Omodei: An officer of CALM spoke up in Mt Magnet and told the minister he was wrong. That was very brave.

Mr F.M. LOGAN: I think the member is right, particularly where the Minister for Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries is concerned. The officer was very brave. Nevertheless, I am sure he was entitled to express his opinion and he was duly answered by the minister. The APB maintains its responsibilities under the Agriculture Protection Board Act 1950, the Agriculture and Related Resources Protection Act 1976 and the Plant Pests and Diseases (Eradication Funds) Act 1976. The board also acts as an advisory group to the department on all biosecurity matters. The Department of Agriculture provides all animal and plant pest management and regulation services to the Agriculture Protection Board, either directly or via the engagement of contractors. The Agriculture Protection Board and the department have recently integrated their consultative mechanisms by combining meetings of zone control authorities and the department's district consultative groups. There are no conflicts with other departments, despite the fact that the member for Warren-Blackwood pointed out an example of a criticism of the minister by a public servant in the Department of Conservation and Land Management. I am sure that person was simply expressing his opinion.

The fifth item raised by the member for Warren-Blackwood was what changes, if any, need to be made to ensure that the Department of Agriculture is focused. I am not too sure what the member was implying. Clearly, the Department of Agriculture is focusing its attention on those areas in which the greatest benefits will accrue to agriculture, the economy and the environment. The Department of Agriculture's recently updated strategic plan places emphasis on six key areas; namely, the production, efficiency and growth of the agricultural sector; biosecurity; environmental stewardship; capacity building; market alignment - that is, ensuring alignment of production with market demands; and increasing the value of Western Australia's agricultural produce. Those are the six key items which came out of the strategic review of the department's operations and on which the department is focusing. These key directions are clearly agriculture focused - the department certainly has not taken its eye off the ball - and have been identified as areas in which the Government has a clear role and can make the greatest contribution. They are the directions that are strongly supported by the department's external funding partners and industry funding bodies.

In conclusion, the Government opposes the motion proposed. Changes are occurring that will ensure the direction and role of the department is aligned to the critical needs of industry, despite what we have heard. In particular, there has been, first, the reform of the department in 2002, with new industry and regional consultative mechanisms; and, secondly, strong growth of industry funding and support, which indicates the department is meeting the needs of agriculture.

As I have indicated, the planned amendment of the Agriculture Act and the new agriculture management Bill will further improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the department. This will provide the appropriate forum in which to debate the role and responsibilities of the Department of Agriculture in servicing the needs of the Western Australian agricultural industry. As I indicated before, the Government's approach to agriculture is not simply through focusing the Department of Agriculture on those six key issues - which it should do, because that keeps its mind clearly focused on agricultural issues; the Government is also focusing on the role and philosophy of sustainability in the agricultural industry. That has global implications. All the global issues - those items that I mentioned previously - need to be acknowledged. The motion, which deals with the establishment of a select committee, does not address those issues, unfortunately. I thought that by now the member for Warren-Blackwood would probably be sick and tired of the Government continuing to ramble on about sustainability. However, it is the philosophy that is driving the Government's decision making. As the member is now aware of that, if the next motion like this includes the area of sustainability, maybe there will be a different response from the Government and from the Minister for Agriculture. However, on this occasion, because of the narrow focus of the motion and because the Government, with the involvement of the industry, has reviewed all the agriculture Acts, will introduce new legislation next year, and has already undertaken a strategic review and restructure of the Department of Agriculture, it cannot see the need for a select committee. Therefore, the Government opposes the motion.

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MR W.J. McNEE (Moore) [6.49 pm]: I will take a few minutes to comment on this important motion. I congratulate the member for Warren-Blackwood because it is an excellent motion. I also congratulate the member for Cockburn for saying no in the nicest possible way.

The Department of Agriculture undertook a strategic review. Do members know why people have a strategic review? Any businessman will tell them - it is because there are financial problems. They either want to lift the bottom line or do something else; that is why people do it. The parliamentary secretary and I both know that the Government has ripped \$40 million out of the guts of the Department of Agriculture. That is why it had to have a strategic review! The parliamentary secretary said things in the nicest possible way and I congratulate him on that.

Agriculture stands at the crossroads. Any young man going into agriculture today has an exciting and good future in front of him. He will need a lot of advice in a lot of areas. It will have to be good sound advice. I am still involved in agriculture and lots of things cross my office desk at home. I cannot read it all because I do not have enough time. I would have to do nothing else if I were to read all the information. I understand because I talk to people in my electorate. There is an information overload. People are being besieged to increase their profit margins. It does not matter whether it is tramline farming, better use of chemicals or hydraulic sprayers. A whole new range of technology is available. It is very difficult to keep up with it.

Let us look at some of the problems confronting young farmers today in the electorate of Moore. The old problems are still there; skeleton weed and wild dogs. Farmers now have to deal with stripe rust. Worse than that is mosaic virus. I think the officers of the Department of Agriculture are miracle workers because they are doing a very good job with a shocking level of resources. They are underfunded in every way but doing a wonderful job. When we went through a bad drought we sought the advice of the veterinarian at the Merredin Dryland Research Institute about what to do with sheep. There are a lot of things people can do. They can be sold, lot fed or fed in their paddocks. It is no mean business; it is not for a mug. People must seek good sound advice. The advice was available. Members opposite think it is a joke. The parliamentary secretary said no to the select committee; it was a great speech. It was horseradish!

Mr P.D. Omodei: I thought it was horseshit!

Mr W.J. McNEE: I did not want to use that word but that is what it was.

Farming today is surrounded by the green lunatic fringe. They want to stop almost everything. They say that if a tree is knocked down it is bad because it will cause salinity. If that is their answer, it is rubbish. Maybe we should be looking at something else. It is very popular to talk about deep drains. They may have their role to play, but we need people like those in the Department of Agriculture who can offer advice in a way that is accepted without any commercial bias. One of the problems farmers have today is commercial bias and they must be very careful of it. I was farming during the days of the Whittington interceptor banks and I squandered \$20 000. Members can be the judge. They can go to my farm and have a look and tell me whether I wasted my \$20 000 or not. I think I did. That is why I would be pretty careful today before taking that step again. I must admit that in my youth I was critical of Department of Agriculture personnel - they were older than I was, of course, and they told me I should not go ahead with that scheme because it would not work. I thought they were a bit rusty and they did not know. The fact is they did know.

The young farmer today is living in a changing world. If anybody tells him that the marketing of his produce will not change, he will not believe it, because it will. Why would a farmer in my age group want to change his marketing arrangements, when he is nice and cosy and things have been good? I would not want to do it. However, in many instances the younger farmer today says he wants to do it, and he is encouraged to do it. I was listening to a radio commentator the other day who was being critical of a farmer who had not forward sold his wool. It is pretty easy to be smart and give advice after the event, because the price of wool fell a dollar a kilo last week, but people in the industry have been saying for some time that farmers should be forward selling at least part of their clip. Some people in the industry are forward selling part of their grain. They are demanding these changes, which I would never have demanded because I was happy with my system and I had my comfort zone. The younger farmer says he must cover his risk and he wants to be the person who determines what he does with his produce, how he will market it and what price he will take. I do not necessarily agree with him, but I am not stupid enough to say that the situation simply will not change. I am sure that, as night follows day, it will change. Whilst that change will take place, there will probably be lots of arguments about how it will happen.

That brings me to the point that we need people in the department who understand these issues. I have a couple of boys who understand all this forward marketing and put options. If people go for those sorts of things they will need skilled advice. It will take more than a few computer skills to know precisely what they are doing. They are trying to take the gambling out of their future, but they need good, sound advice on how to do it. My

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advice has always been that unless it is clearly understood, keep out of it, but there are people with businesses who can help. The Department of Agriculture has a role to play. The amalgamation of the Agriculture Protection Board and the department was not a bad thing, but the board is not as good as it used to be because of the money this Government has taken away from the Department of Agriculture. The APB played a real role. People from the board came to my farm when I was concerned about a weed similar to skeleton weed. I called the local fellow, who came out and took a sample. Within 24 hours he said to me that it was not a problem and that it was this plant and so on. Today I would not know where to look for him. I would probably find him stuck away in an office somewhere filling in forms, because, unfortunately, that is what has happened to those people, if they still exist. The Government stands condemned for the way it has withdrawn funds and support for the Department of Agriculture.

Debate interrupted, pursuant to standing orders.