

ADJOURNMENT OF THE HOUSE

HON N.F. MOORE (Mining and Pastoral - Leader of the House) [5.05 pm]: I move -
That the House do now adjourn.

Croatian History Group - Adjournment Debate

HON LJILJANNA RAVLICH (East Metropolitan) [5.05 pm]: Tonight I record my appreciation of the work of the Croatian History Group. Last Sunday I was invited to a function at the Valley View Garden Café Restaurant organised by the Villa Dalmacia Association and the Croatian History Group. I was pleased to be invited to attend. Unbeknown to me, little has been recorded about the contribution of the Croatian people to Western Australian society. It was fantastic that a group of very learned people have taken the initiative to form a group with a committed task; namely, to ensure that the history of Croatian people and their contribution to the economic and social development of this State does not continue to go unnoticed. I place on record my appreciation, and that of the Croatian community generally and the broader Western Australian community, for this effort.

As was pointed out to me, the immigration of Croatian people to Australia dates back to the mid-1800s. I had not realised that it extended back that far. I had two grandfathers who came here in the early 1900s, who I thought may have been some of the earliest Croatian immigrants to Western Australia. Clearly, many Croatian people had trodden that path from Croatia to Western Australia long before the early 1900s.

Unfortunately, the history of the contribution of Croatian people is very poorly documented. The Croatian History Group has decided, as a subgroup of the Villa Dalmacia Association, to ensure that this history is told. Croatian immigrants made contributions in many areas in Western Australia, such as the fishing and agriculture industries. One need not look too far around the Perth metropolitan area to see significant contributions in places like Osborne Park and Gwellup, and the market gardens in Wanneroo. Spearwood has extensive housing developments these days, yet much of that land was previously used for agriculture. In the Swan Valley, for example, much of the land through the Morrison Road area once upon a time was vineyards. The activity in the area is not restricted to Swanview, as it occurred throughout the Swan Valley. We look at the Swan Valley with pride these days. We must recognise and appreciate the contribution of not only Croatians, but also Italian and other people who have come from that eastern and southern European region. They have made a significant contribution to the tobacco industry, the timber industry, goldmining, limestone quarrying and in various primary industries.

The children of some of the early immigrants have been educated and we see them in all areas of endeavour. We see Croatian names in law, medicine, accounting and so on.

Hon Derrick Tomlinson: In journalism.

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: Indeed; that is the case with Mr Zekulich, and people in a range of other areas. I hope we will see more people of Croatian descent involved in politics; I hope I am but the first.

I cannot miss the area of sport where there have been some fantastic contributions by people of Croatian origin. It is a little sad that there is no recorded history of the contributions these people have made to this society. I found that hard to believe. However, I am told that that is the case. The Croatian History Group has decided to undertake the collection of oral histories, documentary and photographic historical material, plus any other items of historical significance, and prepare a comprehensive history based on those contributions. The commitment by the members of the Croatian History Group is so great that 18 people from the community have completed a course in oral history at Curtin University of Technology to ensure that as they go out to members of the Croatian community they know how to go about collecting data from individuals if they are participating in this type of activity for the first time. That demonstrates a marvellous commitment.

I place on record my thanks to the committee members: Maria Della-Bona who is the co-chairperson, Leonore Sikirich also a co-chairperson, Dr Norm Marinovich, Mr Neven Smoje, Mrs Zarka Sumich, Mrs Nada Zuvela, Mr Steve Sikirich, Dr Tony Parentich and Mr Joe Antunovich. My understanding is that they have already commenced some interviews not only in the metropolitan area but also at Kalgoorlie, and I understand they have gone as far as the Kimberley. No doubt they will be making their way to some of the southern towns in this State. They are after any information they can obtain about individuals, their parents or their grandparents. Morning tea was particularly delightful at the Valley View Garden Cafe Restaurant. Mr Jim Talijancich from Talijancich Wines was invited as a guest and he gave an overview of what it was like for him growing up in the Swan Valley, particularly with his very close knit Croatian family.

Hon Barry House: You should get the Croatian Sensation from Manjimup.

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: We hope the history group goes to Manjimup and speaks to the Croatian Sensation. Provided the member gives me the name I will make sure that that connection occurs. Jim Talijancich junior, gave an excellent account of the history of wine making in that region and the contribution by Croatian people to that industry and how it evolved to the point where Australia, and particularly the Swan Valley, is now recognised as a premium winegrowing area. Much of that reputation can be traced back to the contribution made by migrants from Croatia and from those eastern and southern European regions.

Having recorded my thanks to those people, I wish them the very best in their endeavours. They are undertaking a most commendable task. I am only too well aware how quickly one can lose a culture. Having been born in Croatia, I sometimes express disappointment that some of my nephews and nieces are barely capable of speaking Croatian. It is very easy to lose language and it should be preserved at all costs. I commend this group for getting its act together and ensuring that it will document what history is available and make it available for successive generations, not only for Croatian people but for all people.

Dairy Industry - Adjournment Debate

HON HELEN HODGSON (North Metropolitan) [5.14 pm]: Over the past couple of weeks a number of members in this place have raised again the issue of the dairy industry and some of the problems facing dairy farmers. I was prompted to speak tonight on the same issue because of some references that were made in this place yesterday about the need for the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission to look at what is happening in the dairy industry and to try to protect the people who are losing out from the restructuring that has occurred. Yesterday, by interjection, I indicated I had been following this issue through correspondence with the ACCC. It is appropriate that having referred to that correspondence I take it further and tell the Chamber what it is that I have discovered.

When the milk price wars commenced about a month ago I wrote to the ACCC and also to the Ministry of Fair Trading to ask what they would do about the undercutting of prices that would have a serious effect on supplies of milk, particularly from the farmers in the south west of this State. I drew to the commission's attention that I felt this could be a predatory pricing practice and that not only the milk producers but also the small retail sector of the market could be affected by way of loss leaders and people being drawn away from them to the major supermarket chains. Last week I asked a question in this place of the Minister for Fair Trading to find out what he considered were the powers of the Ministry of Fair Trading in this matter. I was disappointed last week, although I was not surprised, to find that the minister does not believe that the ministry has any jurisdiction in the milk industry and the various areas that are affected by it. From recollection I asked specifically about the producers, manufacturers, suppliers and the wholesale and retail sectors. The general response was that the minister did not believe he had any powers in this matter. By coincidence, on the same day I received a letter from the ACCC addressing the same issue. The letter from the commission refers to the Trade Practices Act and reads -

... the Commission views section 46 as a competition provision and not a catch-all for harsh behaviour by powerful corporations. To determine whether conduct breaches section 46 requires establishing a high degree of market power; use of that power in conduct that would not be regarded as rational in the normal course of business (courts will not interfere merely because someone has been hurt: without an anti-competitive purpose, damage to a competitor may be only a manifestation of the competitive process) and a proscribed purpose under section 46.

Predatory pricing is one form of conduct which may be a misuse of market power.

The paragraph that concerns me reads -

After careful consideration of the information I am of the view that there is no evidence to suggest that the major supermarket chains have temporarily reduced their milk prices, below the level justified by competition, for the purpose of damaging, eliminating or deterring competitors in contravention of section 46 of the Act.

My concern is that we were told that the overall effect of deregulation would be monitored. The reason the Australian Labor Party in the end agreed to let the legislation pass was in part an agreement with the minister that the ACCC and the Ministry of Fair Trading would be approached to monitor the effect of what was happening. As Hon Barry House has just interjected, "They have ducked the issue again." We have a total focus on the end price of milk without any reflection of the cost structure it takes to produce that product and whether people can sustain production of the product at the prices that are available. The effect of competition may be to lower milk prices, and consumers may benefit in the short term. How much benefit will it be to consumers if we end up with a decimated milk industry in Western Australia that cannot produce milk at the prices offered, that sells its cows off for meat or for whatever it can get for them, and milk is imported from the other States?

I do not want to reopen the question of whether this was inevitable, because my views on that are firmly on the record. However, I am saying that nothing is happening to protect the industry. The state watchdog, which is the Ministry of Fair Trading - its views were confirmed by the minister - and the federal watchdog, which is the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, both say that it is acceptable for the undercutting to go on. That is not good enough and it is not an adequate response. The independent sector of the retail market is having great difficulty retaining customers and the producers will be driven out of business. If this is the outcome of competition, I can understand fully why competition is regarded as such a dirty word by people in some places, including those who were in Melbourne earlier this week.

Hon Mark Nevill: The mining industry has always had that competition. It is a price taker.

Hon HELEN HODGSON: Yes, it is. However, in Western Australia, a major restructure of the industry is taking place. The situation is that people who had been able to make a living have had the capital value of their assets slashed as a result of the deregulation, and now they cannot even make enough to cover their running costs. That is the point of it all. Here in Western Australia there is a certain cost structure, which may be different from that in other States. However, while the pressure is on to keep reducing the price of milk because it is driven at the top end by the contracts between supermarkets and some of the manufacturers, the effects of that will filter down and affect not only the producers of the milk but also the people in the south west of Western Australia who rely on the infrastructure supporting the milk industry and who will no longer be able to make a living. It will decimate the rural sector of the south west.

Hon Barry House: The ACCC should be examining that agreement between Woolworths (WA) Pty Ltd and National Foods Ltd (WA). It is an anti-competitive agreement.

Hon HELEN HODGSON: I drew the ACCC's attention to that. I said that there was an agreement. In fact, it is my understanding that those prices were negotiated before the deregulation even occurred. For milk manufacturers in Western Australia to negotiate an agreement which pre-empted legislation which had not passed this Parliament, in an environment in which there were still quota prices, and to then use that in this undercutting structure, as they are doing now, comes pretty close to being predatory pricing. Somebody must take an interest in that. I understand that the task force which will look at the future directions of the industry is about to take action, but what is the good of a task force looking at future markets if we do not have an industry that can survive until those markets can be identified and developed? We have a problem here from the ground up, and somebody must do something about it. I do not care whether it is the state price watchdog, the Ministry of Fair Trading, or the federal price watchdog, the ACCC; somebody must do something. We cannot stand by and see an industry decimated in this way.

Roebuck Plains Station, Inquiry into Purchase - Adjournment Debate

HON MARK NEVILL (Mining and Pastoral) [5.23 pm]: This morning I received a fax from the office of the chief executive officer of the Indigenous Land Corporation. The fax has a bit of a go at me. It says that I implied that Sir Laurence Street had resigned from the inquiry into the purchase of Roebuck Plains station in part because "it is impossible for him to do a proper inquiry into the purchase of Roebuck Plains Station without independent people at the cattle count". For a start, I said that that may have been a reason. I made it clear that I did not know the reason. I think another probable reason he resigned was that his powers were not adequate to cover the terms of reference, which required him to look at the activities of private companies. He certainly did not have the power to subpoena documents and witnesses. It was quite inadequate. Sir Laurence may have resigned because he knew that he could not complete the work and had mediation work to do in Europe. That is quite reasonable.

The letter goes on to say that I would be pleased to know that Hon Andrew Rogers, QC has agreed to take over from Sir Laurence. Mr Andrew Rogers, QC will face the same problems as Sir Laurence Street would have faced in conducting an inquiry into the purchase of Roebuck Plains station. The issue hinges on whether there are 12 000 or 18 000 cattle on the station. That makes a \$1.5m to \$2m difference in what the station may be worth. The last paragraph reads -

On the question of independent people at the cattle count, please take this letter as an open invitation for you to come to Roebuck Plains for as long as you like. Be assured we would appreciate your assistance with the count and other matters associated with the muster. If you were unable to accept this invitation, we would be most happy for you to appoint an independent person to attend the mustering count.

That is all well and good, but the last sentence says -

Naturally, if you were to do this we would expect you to pay his or her costs.

To do a count of 12 000 cattle would be five days' or a week's work. One cannot do an independent count with one observer; two would be required - one to do the count and one to ensure the cattle are not being moved in the back paddocks.

It is insulting for the ILC to ask me to pay for the one or two independent observers. It managed to pay \$8.2m for a property that most informed observers value at about \$3.5m. With that sort of largesse, one would expect that it could pay for two independent cattle observers. That would probably cost less than the cost of employing some of these fancy lawyers and Queen's counsels that the ILC seems to hire for little benefit. It seems to me that the ILC is penny-wise when it comes to saving money by getting me to pay for the independent observers and pound-foolish when it comes to dealing out taxpayers' money for large stations.

I will endeavour to find two independent people and take up the ILC's offer. That might require my raising some funds, but I will endeavour to do so. I do not have five days to a week to sit on Roebuck Plains station counting cattle for the ILC. I think it would have known when it wrote the letter that I am extremely busy with a big electorate and a considerable workload. It is an entirely inappropriate letter to be written to me. It is clear to blind Freddy that any inquiry into the purchase of Roebuck Plains station will have little value unless one can independently audit and determine the number of cattle that are on the property. I suggest to the ILC that it focus on getting the inquiry correct. This is an internal inquiry; it is not an open inquiry. It reports to the board. The inquirer, whether it is Mr Rogers or Sir Laurence Street, does not have the power to do the job set out in the terms of reference. Frankly, it is ridiculous, and the federal Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, John Herron, should have stepped in on this matter months ago, and it is about time he did.

Question put and passed.

House adjourned at 5.29 pm
