

MERGER LEGISLATION, CO-OPERATIVE BULK HANDLING LTD AND THE GRAIN POOL OF
WESTERN AUSTRALIA

4. Hon MURRAY CRIDDLE to the Minister for Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries:

The Governor's speech indicated that a Bill regarding Co-operative Bulk Handling Ltd and its merger with the Grain Pool of Western Australia will come before this session of Parliament. Will that legislation be passed through the Parliament in time for the merger in November?

Hon KIM CHANCE replied:

The phrase the Arab world uses at times like this is "in sha' Allah", which means "God willing". That is the best answer I can give the member!

Hon Murray Criddle: Are you indicating that you are God?

Hon KIM CHANCE: Indeed not. The Governor's speech referred to the grain licensing Bill. Although it did not refer to the bulk handling amendment Bill, it is also a priority for the Government. The Bills are required to effect the reform of those organisations and to permit their merger. It was my ambition to have those Bills through Cabinet and prepared for public comment during the winter break. Clearly, we were not able to do that. The delay occurred because the National Competition Council raised issues about the outcome of the legislation. It has been a period of frustration for me. The council's intervention in this issue has cost me, this Parliament and the grain industry some 10 weeks of work that we could not afford to lose as we are on a tight schedule. The issue raised by the National Competition Council surprised me. As a former minister, Hon Murray Criddle is aware that when the National Competition Council wants to raise an issue, it first threatens the State's national competition payments and then says that for the threat to go away, the State must do things the council's way. In my view, that is a form of sovereign risk for the State of Western Australia. However, we addressed the issues. I flew to Melbourne on the midnight horror last Wednesday night and met with Graeme Samuel and his associates at Tullamarine Airport. We had a two-hour meeting, after which I got back on the plane and flew home. However, I believe I can report that we have now put those issues to bed with a satisfactory outcome for the State's interests. I no longer believe that the State's interests are threatened on that matter. I was surprised that the issue was raised in that way. The legislation we made available to the National Competition Council is more liberal than the Commonwealth's own grain marketing legislation, which establishes the Australian Wheat Board. This State modelled its legislation on the AWB legislation, and then went one step further. I am amazed that the Commonwealth threatened Western Australia on the basis of competition policy as our proposed legislation is more liberal than that which it has enacted. However, this is the world in which we live.

I deeply regret the delay. My task now is to get the Bills in their current shape through Cabinet and into Parliament as quickly as possible. I acknowledge the very clear expressions of support I have had from opposition parties, including Hon Murray Criddle's party, and their indication that the legislation will be dealt with promptly when it comes into the Parliament. We must recognise that the financial year for these organisations ends on 31 October. It is absolutely essential that we have both pieces of legislation through the Parliament to enable the merger to occur in good time.