



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Food Labelling

SPEECH

Monday, 18 October 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Date Monday, 18 October 2010
Page 16
Questioner
Speaker Rishworth, Amanda, MP

Source House
Proof Yes
Responder
Question No.

Ms RISHWORTH (Kingston) (11.14 am)—I move:

That this House:

- (1) notes significant community concern regarding the clarity, simplicity and accuracy of food labelling, including labelling identifying the:
 - (a) origin of the food;
 - (b) nutritional value of the food; and
 - (c) food production methods used, including the use of food technologies;
- (2) recognises that:
 - (a) adequate food labelling laws should aim foremost to protect the health and safety of consumers and eliminate deceitful or misleading labelling information;
 - (b) having clear, simple and accurate labelling on food empowers consumers and enables them to make informed food choices; and
 - (c) for food labelling laws to be effective, they need to be rigorously and consistently enforced;
- (3) supports the Australian and New Zealand Food Regulation Ministerial Council's establishment of an independent review into food labelling; and
- (4) encourages the Government and State and Territory governments to examine the results of this review, and work together to ensure that our food labelling laws deliver the outcomes our community desires.

I am very pleased to move and speak to this motion about the inadequacy of food labelling. We are spoiled for choice when it comes to food. When you walk through your local supermarket you will see many types of food packaged in so many ways from all over the world. While this variety is something that we can all enjoy, without simple, accurate and clear labelling it is extremely difficult for consumers to make informed choices about what they are eating and where it comes from. Australians are entitled to know what is in their food and how and where their food is made. While I recognise that there is limited space

on labels, the limited space that is available should display information that allows consumers to have the confidence to make an informed choice.

There can be no question that there is a wide-ranging number of issues relating to food labelling; however, today I propose to highlight just a few of the key issues. Country of origin is one area that there is significant consumer interest in. While country of origin information is available on a number of food products it is not consistently applied on all processed and unprocessed food or for all key ingredients. Many consumers tell me that they want to buy Australian grown and manufactured food. Consumers want to buy Australian food not only to support Australian farmers, although this is often a big motivation, but for health and safety reasons. Consumers have confidence in Australian farming practices, including things such as the chemicals used and the type of environment the food is grown in. But they are not equally confident about the standards and environment for growing food in other countries.

Therefore, it is no wonder that there is significant frustration in the community when labels that read 'made in Australia from local and imported ingredients' are often seen on the shelves. If a claim is qualified by adding the 'and imported ingredients' tag there seem to be no criteria to measure it against. As a result, a consumer buying this product has no idea how much or what part of the food is processed in Australia or, indeed, what part is processed overseas. I have been contacted by many constituents who have looked into this and after investigation have found that food that claims to be made from Australian and important ingredients contains up to 95 per cent imported ingredients.

Furthermore, consumers who read a label that states 'from imported ingredients' have no idea where the imported ingredients come from, making it very hard for them to make informed choices. Providing a geographic origin of all food and major ingredients will go a significant way in helping consumers make informed choices about what they are buying. In addition, there are many labelling slogans that are used to market how Australian these products are. Statements such as 'manufactured in Australia', 'Australian owned' and 'product of Australia' are all often seen on labels. These claims are confusing

to consumers when they are trying to determine how much of the food product actually comes from Australia.

Even when there are criteria for labels such as 'made in Australia', many consumers do not realise that those criteria mean that the product must have been substantially transformed in Australia and that 50 per cent or more of the cost of producing or manufacturing the product occurred in Australia. Many consumers, even if they knew about the criteria, would find it hard to determine what this actually means when it comes to food. The reason for this is that the criteria for the label 'made in Australia' does not apply just to food; it also applies to whitegoods and clothing.

Food is different from other goods and this was recently recognised through the Australian Made, Australian Grown campaign which provides the 'Australian grown' certification. Products that display an 'Australian made' logo or an 'Australian grown' logo must meet the compliance test set out in the Trade Practices Act and the campaign's own code of practice. The code of practice clearly defines what is meant by 'made in Australia' but also what is meant by 'grown in Australia'. The development of this logo is very important and encouraging. It will be very important to encourage food producers to use the logo and for consumers to be educated to look for this logo.

In addition to the claims about the origin of food, there are many other claims made on food labels that are confusing for consumers. Often these claims are used as a marketing tool—slogans such as 'natural', 'pure', 'fresh' or 'free range', just to name a few. For many of these descriptors there is no definition or guidelines for use within the Food Standards Code, effectively making these terms meaningless to the consumer. It is therefore not surprising that a *Choice* investigation demonstrated that claims such as these on labels did not come close to meeting consumer expectations. And while the ACCC has established industry guidelines for these terms, ensuring that there is a shared definition that both industry and consumers understand could significantly help consumers make an informed decision. Some progress has been made—for example, an Australian standard has been decided on organic and biodynamic products, which can guide the ACCC. However, this standard does not contain mandatory criteria in relation to such claims.

Health experts are becoming more and more alarmed about the impact that obesity is having on our health, especially with chronic diseases. There is an increase in the incidence of diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease, and reducing our intake of fats, salt and sugar does help prevent such diseases. However, with so much choice in packaged and pre-prepared food it can be difficult for consumers to

determine how much fat, salt and sugar they are eating. While packaged food does display nutritional tables on the back of packets, the tables are often difficult to read, are in very small print and, if you have been able to read them, are difficult to understand.

Competing with these nutritional tables on food labels are the many marketing claims proclaiming health benefits. These are much more prominent—they are usually on the front of the package—but they rarely provide an overall rating of how healthy a product is. I, like many others in this chamber I am sure, have been caught out by this. For example, I once opted for a yoghurt that was labelled '96 per cent fat free' only to realise some time later, and after a little weight gain, that while the manufacturers had reduced the fat they had also increased the sugar content.

Clear and consistent food labelling against objective criteria, providing an overall nutritional value, is really important. Not only is it important for the consumer; it also has huge potential in supporting preventative health strategies and improving the overall health of our community. There have been a number of submissions made to the food labelling review that have argued that simple front-of-package labelling such as traffic light labelling would significantly assist consumers in making healthier choices. In particular, it would help consumers who might not have as much knowledge or be as literate as others. While traffic light labelling on the front of the packet is just one example of how we can better provide nutritional information, I do believe that we need to seriously consider how better to present nutritional information on food to help consumers make healthy choices. Ensuring consumers have accurate and consistent simple information on labels is an issue that many in our community are concerned about. It is an area which many in our community believe can be improved.

In part of this motion I have specified the importance of enforcement. Enforcing the presentation of clear and accurate information is really important. I have often used, in this place, olive oil as an example. Many people have come to see me with a belief that some of the imported olive oils, labelled extra virgin olive oil, are not accurately labelled. After investigation, the ACCC has indeed found that some of the imported olive oils that proclaim to be extra virgin olive oil actually contain canola oil and are not the purest form of olive oil. So enforcement is very critical. There is some division on the issue of enforcement between the states and territories and the ACCC. I hope that better coordination arises on the issue of enforcement so that we can make sure that what is on the label is actually what people are eating.

I would like to take this opportunity to note that there is a formal review into the issue of food

labelling currently being undertaken, headed by Dr Neal Blewett. This is a very important review and I am very pleased that it is happening. I look forward to examining the review's recommendations when it is released early next year. Australian consumers want to be confident in the food choices they make and the information needs to be easily accessible. I therefore commend the motion to the House.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. DGH Adams)—Is the motion seconded?

Mr Georganas—I second the motion.