



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

**FOOD STANDARDS AMENDMENT
(TRUTH IN LABELLING LAWS) BILL 2009**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Thursday, 20 August 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

Date Thursday, 20 August 2009
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Questioner
Speaker Brown, Sen Bob

Source Senate
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Senator BOB BROWN (Tasmania—Leader of the Australian Greens) (9.35 am)—*The incorporated speech read as follows—*

Overview of the Bill

This Bill provides for a clear and accurate system of food labelling, specifically information on country of origin. Australian consumers need simple information to be able to make informed choices at the supermarket. The labelling regime facilitates the option for consumers, in the supermarket filling their trolley with products to support the Australian economy, Australian farmers, Australian manufacturers and producers. Under the current labelling regime consumers are being deceived by confusing laws and deprived of genuine choice.

The Australian Greens and Independent Senator, Nick Xenophon, have co-sponsored this Bill to give consumers real choice and safeguard Australian jobs.

This Bill amends section 16 of the Food Standards Australia New Zealand Act 1991 to limit the use of the word “Australian” to those foods which are 100 percent produced in Australia. In the case of food which contains one or more imported ingredients the food product must display notice of the inclusion in the food of imported ingredients in letters of at least 15 mm on the front label.

The Bill also outlines specific provisions for fruit juices and drinks ensuring that liquids labelled as juice do not partly or wholly contain fruit skins.

Country of Origin labelling- a confusing history

In 1994 the Labor Government attempted to legislate for the labelling of goods which claimed to be made, manufactured, packed or designed in Australia. Despite two Committee inquiries, the Bill lapsed when Parliament was prorogued prior to the 1996 election.

In 1998 the Liberal Government amended the provisions of the Trade Practices Act which brought in our current, misleading system of labelling, which sees consumers who think they are buying a wholly Australian product possibly getting only a half Australian product.

The current labelling regime is less than clear. It states that in order to use the words ‘Australian Made’ the product must be “substantially transformed” in Australia [i.e. the final manufacturing process must take place here] and 50% or more of the cost of production must be incurred in Australia. Furthermore, in order to use the words ‘Product of Australia’, all significant components or ingredients must originate from Australia, and all, or virtually all, of the production processes must take place in Australia.

The consumer requires an explanatory document the size of a small thesis to be able to grasp the complexity of definitions and interpretations of terminology to decipher which products are actually 100% made in Australia.

The Australian Greens moved amendments to the Liberal Government’s proposed Bill in 1998 to have the term ‘Made in Australia’ defined as a product that was 100% made in Australia and to clarify the difference between the terms ‘Product of Australia’ and ‘Made in Australia’. To the detriment of Australian consumers, these amendments were voted down by both the Labor Party and the Coalition Party.

The concurrent advertising campaign, undertaken by the Howard Government, aimed to educate consumers about the difference between a ‘Product of Australia’ and ‘Made in Australia’ has failed and consumers continue to be confused and misled by labels.

This Bill seeks to rectify this situation and provide simple, clear labels to facilitate consumer choice.

My previous attempts in the Senate to bring certainty for consumers through my Private Senators’ Truth in Labelling Bill 2003 [2005], has never been resolved by a vote in the parliament. That bill sought to ensure all packaged meat, fish, fruit and vegetables placed on the market in Australia must have labelling identifying its country of origin and all unpackaged goods must have the country of origin identified at the point of sale. It also covered residues or contaminants in food of pesticides, heavy metals, and labelling for genetically engineered foods.

Country of Origin labelling – the way forward

It is clear from research, undertaken by Roy Morgan in late 2006, that Australian consumers want to buy Australian and that more than two thirds consciously do so ‘whenever possible’ or ‘often’. This Bill ensures the good will of Australian consumers is not undermined by the current confusing labelling regime.

Consumers want to know where their food comes from for a variety of reasons. Buying locally grown and produced food means profits and jobs stay in Australia. An increasing reliance on the long-distance transport and refrigeration of foods that are grown thousands of kilometres away impacts heavily on our carbon foot print. Buying local also reduces the environmental impact of our food choices by minimising transportation. Buying local, Australian products is often more convenient and the food is fresher and better tasting.

I am pleased to be co-sponsoring this Bill with Senator Xenophon and I commend it to the Senate.