

Labor Senators' dissenting comments

Labor Senators must express their disappointment on the outcome of this inquiry.

Referred to the Select Committee on the 25th June 2008, and having had its terms of reference expanded and its reporting date repeatedly extended by the Senate, this inquiry has failed to generate a report worthy of the time and effort that many Senators have given to the inquiry.

After 17 hearings, 162 submissions and hundreds of pages of Hansard, the Committee has produced three short interim reports and now this short final report.

It is probably fair to say that given the extremely broad subject matter of the inquiry a wholly satisfactory outcome was always going to be hard to achieve. Nevertheless we feel that the majority report now being presented to the Senate falls well short of the standard of report that could have been produced.

The Federal election campaign falling in the month before the report was due to be presented has no doubt impacted on the amount of time that Senators have been able to give to consideration of the document. In our view however this has exacerbated the problem, not caused it.

The fact is, the subject matter before the inquiry is vitally important. However, a lack of focus in the pursuit of this issue has led to the inquiry jumping from issue to issue without effectively drawing them all together to allow the Committee to present a cogent set of findings which thoroughly addresses these vital issues.

That is not to say that evidence received by the Committee is not valuable or that issues touched upon during the course of the inquiry were not important. They were. To that extent the inquiry process had value. However the Committee did not find itself (was not) able to make findings or recommendations on vital issues such as:

- The value of rural land and the ability of farmers to make a reasonable return on their investment
- The impact of the supply chain, transport costs and market opportunities on the farmers on the one hand and the consumers on the other
- The impact of trade practices law on the farming community and the issue of the dominance of the retail food sector by two companies, including the likely impact of the marketing of the home brand products on the Australian food manufacturing sector
- The viability of current farming practices and the long term sustainability of farming in some regions given the challenges of climate change

This is far from an exhaustive list of issues the Committee should have pursued.

It is our suggestion that “digestible” parts of this inquiry should be further pursued by the Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Reference Committee - the Committee that the Senate intended would, in ordinary course of events, deal with these matters. There is a significant amount of evidence presented to this inquiry which future inquiries could adopt for their purposes and this would be a cost effective method giving value to this Committee’s work over the last two years.

We do not support the recommendations in the majority report which in our view require significantly more consideration than the committee has been able to give them. We would be happy to consider these issues further in future inquiries into relevant areas of the terms of reference of this inquiry conducted by the appropriate committee.

Senator Kerry O'Brien

Senator Glenn Sterle