

Quarantine Investigation

Background

The Australian Quarantine Inspection Service has been under fire from a number of sources for some years for the way it has been administering its responsibilities.

Perhaps dissatisfaction with AQIS reached its zenith with its culpability over the introduction of Equine Influenza into the Australian horse population a few months ago. The losses suffered by those engaged in the horse racing industry as well as those who are concerned with performance horses has yet to be measured. Certainly it runs into many scores of millions: and, given the likely outcome of the Callinan inquiry, it could well be tested in the courts by means of a class action against the Commonwealth government which must assume ultimate responsibility for AQIS.

Substance

The EI outbreak does seem to be a clear example of failure on behalf of AQIS management to have in place and enforce, procedures capable of maintaining the safety and integrity of our Continent against the onset of harmful and dangerous plant and animal diseases. Quite obviously the procedures we have in place are either inadequate or inappropriate- or both.

What the organisation clearly needs is a complete restructuring. It is not clear and may never be revealed why the procedures which went wrong with the EI catastrophe happened. But some of those with knowledge going beyond the EI problem can certainly identify problems.

Long before the EI the AQIS was running into problems with aspects of its responsibilities relating to plant and animal disease problems more generally. In particular, it has, in recent years, been unable to separate its role as the watchdog over our plant and animal welfare with imports with Australia's role as an international trading nation- and the obligations which flow to Australia in that context by virtue of our Membership of the World Trade Organisation. Under WTO rules we are required to conduct our quarantine activities so as to ensure that barriers to imports on quarantine grounds are not in fact an excuse for trade restrictions.

AQIS officials seem to have taken upon themselves the right to determine for themselves whether what is being done meets WTO rules. That is not their responsibility but the government's.

It would appear that this problem arises because the AQIS has been placed within the international trade division of the responsible department.

SOLUTION

First AQIS should be set up as an independent Authority staffed entirely by officials able to judge whether or not, on the balance of probability of harm to the Australian people or to our agricultural industries, it is appropriate for an animal or plant life to be excluded from Australia.

Matters of trade responsibilities should not be considered by AQIS. What they should be required to do is to advise the

government of the outcome of their objectively conducted scientific studies.

The trade implications of any such advice should be for the government to determine.

Unless these two functions are separated then no quarantine service can actually serve the needs of the Australian public.

Mr Colin Teese

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