



Speech By
Steve Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

BURNETT ELECTORATE, CASUAL LABOUR

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (3.07 am): For the benefit of the House, I would like to table a report of a meeting conducted last year to highlight a serious issue in my electorate of transient and casual labour hire.

Tabled paper: Document titled 'Horticultural Industry Concerns and Abuses', dated 28 November 2012 [[2218](#)].

The Burnett and Childers region is one of the productive horticultural areas in Australia. So it is no surprise that a large number of backpackers form an important part of the industry's capacity to carry out field work while visiting our part of the Coral Coast. It has been raised previously in my electorate that legitimate businesses and workers are experiencing financial and competition pressures because of some illegal and disreputable labour hire and harvesting contractors. It must be emphasised that there are many credible and compliant contractors operating services with international visitors. However, it appears that the federal government and their departments have failed in their duties in not removing permanently these dodgy operators from the industry. We are witnessing failures in relation to profitability and fair work practice by these small business operators.

The federal member for Hinkler and I have been meeting with industry and we were led to believe that the Australian Taxation Office is aware of the cash and paperless operations within the horticultural industry. Yet it appears that no significant action has been taken to deal with or change the behaviour of these dubious operators who abuse their employees in terms of fair wages and superannuation entitlements. The amount of money would be significant and the practice is affecting those growers and contractors who do the right thing. Of greater concern is the exploitation and exposure of employees to breaches in workplace health and safety and working conditions. Workers in some circumstances are not being correctly supervised. We regularly hear of abuse such as lack of water, toilets and rest areas.

Of three significant employers in my electorate who have entered into administration over the last two years, all have suffered media attention because of unpaid wages and entitlements but the reality is that in most cases unpaid wages were in fact the responsibility of labour hire contractors. Every bad experience—every international worker and backpacker who is treated badly—has a terrible flow-on effect on our region's reputation and serious effects on areas like tourism.

Investigations in the past have failed to prevent unscrupulous operators from continually abusing the system, which has resulted in ineffective prosecutions. I go on record to say that this inaction is creating an environment for illegal immigration and exploitation of foreign workers who hide their identities behind the practice of paperless operations. I support the federal member for Hinkler's call for a doubling of commitment by government agencies. There is enough evidence to warrant a well-coordinated, cross-departmental task force and flying squads that should include the ATO, ATSIC, Immigration and Fair Work with police backup to crack down on these crooks. Enough is enough and our society should demand that these practices stop. Happy International Women's Day to everyone