Many of you will have heard that the Commonwealth Government has prohibited the import of all cattle, goats and sheep from every overseas country as from the 31st May. There is one main reason why this ban had to be instituted, and the reason is a cattle and sheep disease called blue tongue. I think I may be able to make the position clearer if I go a little into the history of blue tongue and the damage that it can cause to the stock.

In the beginning, blue tongue was confined to Africa. It is prevalent nearly all the time amongst the cattle population of Africa and occasionally it spreads from the cattle to the sheep population with devastating results. The disease is not particularly harmful for cattle but it can affect up to 50% in the sheep population. It is quite true that the first ravages of the disease will kill only up to 10% to 15% of the sheep population, but the after affects of the blue tongue can make it necessary to destroy a further 40%. The severity of blue tongue on the sheep population has made it absolutely necessary for the Commonwealth Government to institute this ban.

For quite a while blue tongue remained confined to Africa but several years ago it spread to the United States of America. However, it was only 3 or 4 years ago that the disease was identified in America. American cattle men had been discovering that their cattle was showing strange symptoms and there had at times been devastating sheep losses in the U.S., but blue tongue is so difficult to identify and isolate that it existed in America for up to 15 years before it was finally nailed down. Following the discovery of the disease in the U.S., imports of cattle from that country were banned. This was shortly after the last shipment of Santa Gertrudis to Australia.

Last year blue tongue was discovered in Spain and Portugal for the first time. This means that the disease has spread across the Straits of Gibraltar and could well become prevalent throughout Europe even though at the present time it is not present in England or other European countries.

The difficulty with blue tongue is the way it is passed on from one animal to the other and in this way it bears a strong relation-
ship to myxomatosis. This disease is passed by insects. They bite an infected animal and can carry the infection to another animal. It is passed from cattle to sheep in the same way. In addition to this, it is very difficult to tell if a particular beast has the disease. Extensive research is being undertaken in South Africa at the present time but knowledge on this aspect is very far from complete.

Furthermore, the disease can be dormant in a mob of cattle for some considerable time. They can show no outward symptoms whatsoever but the cattle could be carrying sufficient infection to enable them to pass the disease to sheep through insects. It is because of this difficulty of detection and because of the fact that blue tongue is passed from one beast to another by insects that makes adequate and quarantine provisions almost impossible. It opens up the danger of the disease being spread hundreds of miles. For instance, it is believed that the disease got into Spain and Portugal by insects being swept across the Straits of Gibraltar in a storm. If that can happen once it can happen again and there is no possible way in which it can be controlled. That is why, even though there is no blue tongue in the United Kingdom at the present time, we have banned the import of cattle and sheep from that country.

At the present time it should also be understood that there is no cure for blue tongue and there is no way of controlling it or in making animals immune. The disease must take its natural course. It is quite clear, especially having in mind the effects on sheep, that we in Australia could not take any possible risk of getting this infection into this country. Its effects could be disastrous, in the true meaning of the term, for every person in Australia. That is the first thing that must be borne in mind, but we must also try and consider the possible effects of this ban on the future quality of our stud beef and dairy herds.

There does not seem to be any opinion about this question. Some seem to think that we can maintain the quality of our beef herds indefinitely. Others believe the quality will deteriorate after a period of 10 or say 15 years, and in this perhaps only time will be the true judge.
Nevertheless, even though at the present time there is no blue tongue in Australia, I believe our scientific research officers should play as active a part as possible in the research of the disease, and if it is possible supplement research being undertaken in South Africa and the U.S. My chief reason for saying this is that I believe that the effects of blue tongue in Australia would be so disastrous that anything that can be done to find some cure for blue tongue should be done and, secondly, if it proves after some period of time that we need to import further blood stock into this country, we will be able to do so, only if we know how to control and detect blue tongue.