

## **FTA bills pass first hurdle**

By Sandra O'Malley and Denis Peters

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A FREE trade deal between Australia and the US passed its first hurdle towards parliamentary approval tonight.

Labor voted with the Government to pass the Australia-US Free Trade Agreement bills in the House of Representatives but the legislation now moves to the Senate, where it will face a much tougher passage. Maverick Queensland MP Bob Katter, NSW independents Tony Windsor and Peter Andren, and Michael Organ (AG, NSW) voted against the bills.

The Opposition insists it will not make a decision on whether it will support or oppose the legislation in the upper house until a Senate committee reports in August.

Opposition agriculture spokesman Gavan O'Connor said Labor would carefully consider the report before determining its position.

"We should not be forced to make a decision to suit the Prime Minister's electoral timetable," he said.

"At present, we don't have enough information to make an informed decision about the purported benefits of the free trade agreement (FTA)."

Manager of Opposition Business Julia Gillard condemned the Government for rushing debate on the bill, which was introduced into the Parliament yesterday.

"The only reason, we know, that the Howard Government has brought these bills on in such an urgent flurry in the last sitting week, is that they smell some political advantage," she said.

"Australians are right to be suspicious of that process and they're right to be suspicious about what the Howard Government has said about the FTA.

"The Australian people are right, because of their suspicions, to wait to have independent and objective advice, to have a thorough investigation."

In a interim report, tabled today, the special Senate committee said there was a range of areas covering copyright that Australia may have surrendered to the US as part of the trade deal.

It also raised concerns that the deal did not include a most favoured nation clause, thus possibly denying Australia benefits that might come to the US from other trade deals it signs.

Trade Minister Mark Vaile said the agreement was finely balanced, politically and economically.

"There is no one in this country that believes this is the perfect deal that delivers everything," he said.

"But it is also not the perfect deal that delivers everything to the other side.

"It is well worthwhile in what it will deliver to the Australian economy.

Mr Vaile said the deal would deliver Australia significant new market access in many export areas.

"It's not just the here and now ... we've got to cast our minds (forward) ... on what it will deliver to the Australian nation," he said.

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