

Wheat marketing splits Coalition

- **Michelle Grattan**
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COALITION senators have clashed over the Government's planned deregulation of bulk wheat export marketing, as angry farmers vented their feelings at a Senate inquiry.

Nationals senators Barnaby Joyce and Fiona Nash, and house member Kay Hull paraded about 50 unhappy growers at a news conference where Liberal senator Bill Heffernan, who favours deregulation, made an unwelcome appearance.

"You are making a goose of yourself," Senator Joyce told Senator Heffernan, accusing him of "bullshit". "I'll let them go on you, Bill," Senator Joyce said, referring to the farmers who were protesting about the end of the single desk. Senator Heffernan retreated to the sidelines, to hear the legislation denounced.

In yesterday's Senate committee hearing on the Government's bill, the farmers interjected and jeered. They were warned they would be thrown out if they did not behave.

The Nationals are dug in against the legislation. Despite their stand, the bill appears set to be passed with Liberal support, in what would be the first split in Opposition ranks on the floor of the new Parliament.

While some Liberals are opposed to the legislation, others support it, with amendments. A spokesman for Opposition Leader Brendan Nelson said the Opposition would not take a decision until the Senate committee report came. This is due next week. But the Nationals are adamant they will not alter their position. The Government wants the bill through the Senate by June 30, when the interim marketing arrangements expire.

Senator Joyce attacked the Liberals. "We have the ridiculous proposition, unfortunately, that our Coalition colleagues are going to support the Labor Party in dismantling one of the greatest advantages for regional people."

Wheat farmer Jock Munro said the new system would hand the industry to American multinationals, putting thousands of growers out of business.

Nationals frontbencher John Cobb, who is Opposition spokesman on regional development, said the legislation favoured big business over small business. With AAP