



Speech by

Mr RUSSELL COOPER

MEMBER FOR CROWS NEST

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NATIVE TITLE (QUEENSLAND) STATE PROVISIONS BILL

Mr COOPER (Crows Nest—NPA) (11.35 a.m.): I, too, want to make a contribution to this historic debate on an historic issue which probably should never have arisen. But thanks to the decision of the High Court in the Wik case, it has caused more divisions in this nation than anything else that we have seen since Federation. It has set the people of Australia apart, and that is tragic. The people in the bush—and that is where I come from—have had and always will have exceptionally good relationships with Aboriginal people. If some of these issues were left to people in the bush to be resolved, I am sure that they would be resolved. But, of course, everyone wants to muscle in, especially the chardonnay brigade—those who want to feel comfortable, warm and fuzzy, and who do not have to put up with the massive costs and divisions that have resulted from that shocking and disgraceful High Court decision. This Parliament, other Parliaments and the people of Australia have been left to clean up the mess. As I said, this has caused some tragic divisions that should never have occurred. Without any suggestion of being patronising, people in the bush just have a natural friendship and respect for each other—we always have and we always will—in spite of the decisions that have been made and the divisions that this type of legislation has caused.

I want to reiterate something that the Premier said in his second-reading speech. He said—

"As a result of this Bill pastoralists, fishermen, miners and others will know that the leases and permits they currently hold are valid, and the rights they thought they possessed under leases and permits are confirmed absolutely."

I want to make sure that that is on the record, because I am sick and tired of the uncertainty that has gone on since Mabo and Wik. The massive costs and divisions that that has caused are nothing short of disgraceful. The Premier also said in his second-reading speech—

"We have honoured our commitment to maintain Queensland as a State with low sovereign risk, which stands by, and does not seek to revisit, the grants it has made in good faith in the past."

Again, that is well and truly noted. Stage 2 is different. The Premier referred to—

"... the establishment of simple, straightforward, workable mechanisms to deal with future activities which might affect native title."

We will believe that one when we see it, because in those circumstances people will be pitted against people—race against race—and that is going to cause massive divisions. That is the sort of thing we simply do not want. The Premier said further—

"I have released a native title strategy for dealing quickly with these issues. An important part of this strategy is the establishment of a working party with senior representatives of the indigenous, mining and primary producer communities."

The Premier went on—

"The indigenous communities will bear some ... pain upon the passage of this Bill ... the pastoralists will have some pain, the miners will bear some pain and the Government will bear pain, too."

It seems that everyone has been pained by this whole operation. I do not disagree with that; it is tragic that that has happened.

The Premier continued—

"I am confident, however, that everyone understands and appreciates that without some flexibility and innovation there could be enormous administrative and cost burdens to manage a process that should really be quite simple and open."

Already the cost burdens have been extraordinary. While I wish the Premier well, I still believe that there will be massive cost burdens to those people involved. He goes on to outline the strategy, which I will not quote. I have consulted with the pastoral industry. Obviously it has an ongoing interest. Obviously it is very concerned to see that the native title issue is resolved. I know that representatives of the farming community will cooperate as much as they possibly can in order to have this issue finalised, finished and out of the way so that people can get on with their lives. In rural communities, whether the native title claims have any success or not, they have devalued the land. This issue has certainly affected the borrowing power of primary producers. It certainly affects the small businesspeople in Queensland towns and provincial cities. That has been going on for some time and will go on for a lot longer yet. That is extremely unfortunate.

As we know, the Opposition supports this Bill, because it validates intermediate period acts and confirms the extinguishment regime in line with the amended 10-point plan. As has been pointed out by other speakers, including the member for Warrego, we should adhere to the 10-point plan and move on. The validation regime will ensure the future of a number of important mining projects, not the least of which is Ernest Henry, and the confirmation regime will give claimants and existing title holders some certainty about where this issue is going and where it might lead.

It has been refreshing to hear at least some of the members opposite also adopting the commonsense view, notwithstanding—as has been made very clear by a range of speakers from this side of the Chamber—the fact that what they are agreeing to is vastly at odds with the views of their party in Canberra on those matters and on a range of other native title matters. However, mixed with that commonsense we have also seen members opposite rush to be the biggest snag and the most politically correct. Generally that can be drawn back to where those people come from and whether they have had good, close relationships with the Aboriginal people on a fair and equitable basis of friendship. The members who have not had those relationships—they have probably never met an Aborigine—would never understand the ramifications of this issue. The prize was taken by the member for Greenslopes, who is having a good old snooze currently, who made one of most conventional of all socialist attacks on pastoralists. He questioned the regime of private ownership of land, which is, of course—

Mr FENLON: I rise to a point of order. I ask that the comments be withdrawn by the member.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr D'Arcy): Order! The member has asked that the comments be withdrawn.

Mr COOPER: I will withdraw. It is too petty to be worried about.

The member for Greenslopes questioned the regime of private ownership of land, which is, of course, a very old favourite with Marxist-Leninists. It is one of their oldest favourites, and we have heard it many times in this Chamber. That also highlights how pathetically out of touch on this issue many people are. Again it is those who are part of the cappuccino brigade, those who have probably never moved west of Ipswich. They would not have the faintest idea.

Mr Lucas: People who live at Ascot.

Mr COOPER: There are no cappuccino machines out there.

Their view is that native title should be a problem only for the bush. They want to dump the whole issue onto the pastoralists and the miners. They want the kudos, as long as it is at the dinner parties in the little leafy suburbs.

Mr Sullivan: Like Ascot.

Mr COOPER: Yes, as well as Wallumbilla, Roma and a few other places. Has the member ever been out there?

Mr Sullivan interjected.

Mr COOPER: Yes, I have been up there most of the time, thank heavens. I do not have to be mixing with characters like the member.

Of course, that view of the members opposite is very convenient. They have not had the experience of living, mixing and talking with Aborigines. Members opposite think that they are for them. As they are so generous when offering the rest of Queensland to others, the first thing that the member for Chermside and the member for Greenslopes could do would be to offer up their frontyard, backyard and their house. They could go into coexistence. They could offer them up by putting them on the

coexistence register. They should start with themselves and then let it spread to others. Of course, it never does start with members opposite and the other do-gooders. Their stance makes them feel warm and fuzzy, knowing that they will never have to deliver. They can say how considerate and how sensitive to the issue they are. They can feel sweet inside knowing full well that they will never have to deliver or go through what the pastoralists and farmers are having to go through now and have had to go through over the past several years. You want to show that you care about native title so long as you never have to worry about it, as long as you have that nice warm inner glow, and as long as it is an issue for people who are far away from your backyards. The pastoralists have had to deal with the problem all the way through. So long as it is someone else's problem, you do not have a worry in the world.

Yesterday the Leader of the Opposition, Mr Borbidge, raised an interesting point by way of interjection. He said that if members opposite really care—if they have that warm and fuzzy feeling with a warm inner glow and wish to make everyone feel good around them—they should list their homes on the coexistence register and be done with it. Let members opposite start with themselves.

Mr Fenlon: Why aren't you prepared to negotiate? Why are you so against negotiation? Why are you so against the parties sitting down and reaching agreement? Why is that?

Mr COOPER: We are talking about the 10-point plan and the validation of those leases. That is the point that we have come to. It has taken so long to get there and has cost so much not only in financial terms but also in human terms in terms of relationships with people. The divisiveness of this issue has been nothing short of disgraceful. I cannot make that point more clearly.

Mr Deputy Speaker—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! I am glad the honourable member has decided to address the Chair.

Mr COOPER: I just said, "Mr Deputy Speaker". Mr Deputy Speaker, would you like me to stand this way to face you? I can hear all that noise coming from the back benches, but that does not seem to matter. I will stand this way if this is how you would like it.

As to miners—the so-called economic empowerment will cost millions of dollars per project. In the case of Century, it will cost tens of millions of dollars. It is to be handled via a process that a former Federal Leader of the Labor Party has described as tantamount to blackmail.

Mr Borbidge: Century was negotiated with \$90m in compensation. Six years later, it is going to be back in the courts. That's the sort of thing supported by the member for Greenslopes.

Mr COOPER: I will accept and repeat that interjection: Century was negotiated originally with \$90m in compensation and all seemed to be well. Now, as the Leader of the Opposition says, it has to go back to the courts. So, in terms of the Century project, my statement that economic empowerment will cost tens of millions of dollars per project is absolutely correct. Why on earth should the mining industry carry that burden alone? I believe it is totally unfair that it should. For people in the bush, that is the central, distasteful, rotten core of this issue. They have had the problem dumped on them. The Premier has said that the problem has been dumped by the Federal Government onto the States. The problem has been dumped on the pastoralists and the miners. As long as someone else fixes the problem, as long as someone else is hurt by the problem, it is not the Federal Government's problem; it does not have to worry. That is the situation at this moment.

Of course, the problem is a long way away. As I said, it is out in the boondocks; it is out in the bush. Mr Deputy Speaker, am I allowed to turn around to say that there are no espresso machines and no chardonnay out there? The members opposite would have to head back home where they could continue to talk about the issue.

Mr Beattie: You live at Ascot.

Mr COOPER: I make no apology for that. I have lived in many places over the past 15 years that I have been in Parliament.

Mr Fouras: Aren't you lucky.

Mr COOPER: I am. I consider myself very fortunate to have been able to move around this State a darned site more than the member for Ashgrove, where I have gained a hell of a lot more experience than he, because I deal with a lot more people from all walks of life, including Aboriginal people, than he does. I doubt very much that he has met an Aborigine. I am very happy to have lived at Ascot and at other places: Roma, Wallumbilla, Jondaryan, Brymaroo, Acland and elsewhere throughout that area. I have loved every bit of it. Queensland is a lovely place. The member ought to have a look at it some time.

I have referred to the attitude of the member for Greenslopes. However, I do not believe that he takes the top prize; someone topped him. The prize goes to Senator Nick Bolkus. Members opposite might have heard of him. He has said that the relationship between pastoralists and Aborigines is

similar to the relationship between landlord and tenant. According to Senator Bolkus, the pastoralists of this country are tenants on their land. That is a view that is shared pretty widely by the Labor Party and, no doubt, shared by the member.

Mr Fenlon interjected.

Mr COOPER: The member can confirm or deny that, but I believe that it is his view. The Left Wing ran the native title debate in the Senate and there was a very concerted effort to whittle away at the rights of pastoralists. That has been going on ever since this farce began. In the Senate, the Labor Party wanted to restrict pastoralists to basically grazing cattle with the right to grow only enough feed to feed those cattle, and that was the end of it. After that, everything would have to go through native title processes. Obviously, that attitude coming from Canberra—that godforsaken place down south—up to Queensland indicates that the Labor Party does not live in the real world.

An Opposition member interjected.

Mr COOPER: Quite frankly, I do not think that there would be a person in this place who would have many good things to say about Canberra. Not too many people would disagree with me on that.

The members of the Labor Party do not understand this issue and they do not live in the real world. That makes it very difficult for us to solve the problems that are waiting to be solved. I believe it is extremely counterproductive that those people have that attitude. They say they want to achieve reconciliation, but from the way they are going about it there will be no reconciliation. That is the tragic part. That is the sad part that the members opposite have to deal with. That is on their consciences. It is certainly not on the coalition's conscience. As I said, for a long, long time our relationship with the Australian bush and the Aboriginal people has been good, and long will it remain so.

As I have said, most people in the city have probably never had that contact with Aboriginal people that they so desperately need. They should have meaningful relationships with Aboriginal people, which is part and parcel of the relationships that people have in the bush, so that they can make appropriate decisions about the issue. As I said, whether I am living at Ascot or anywhere else, I am so pleased to have been able to live in many, many parts of Queensland and come to know many, many Queenslanders, whatever their race, colour or creed, and to enjoy a very honest, open and decent relationship with them. All I can say is that, when we are trying to solve problems such as this one regarding native title, one uses a basis of experience and trust. Of course, if one does not have that experience, one cannot gain the trust. Therefore, one cannot possibly make the decisions that we so desperately need.

An honourable member interjected.

Mr COOPER: The members opposite keep interjecting. This matter has at last been brought to this Parliament, which is now validating the 10-point plan legislation that has eventually come out of Canberra. It is not over yet. I think every single one of us knows that. I think that an enormous amount of goodwill is going to be required to resolve this issue. It is not resolved yet; it is far from over. As I said, the situation should never have arisen in the first place. If it were not for the High Court Wik decision, we would not have had the division and the hatred that we have had throughout this State and nation. That in itself is the tragic part. It should never have happened. That decision by the High Court on the Wik case was nothing short of disgraceful.
