



Speech by

BRUCE DAVIDSON

MEMBER FOR NOOSA

Hansard 3 December 1999

FORESTRY AMENDMENT BILL

Mr DAVIDSON (Noosa—LP) (3.28 p.m.): In rising to speak to the Forestry Amendment Bill, I do so on behalf of the 54 workers at the Boral mill in Cooroy who face job losses in September of next year. Fifty-four workers and their families are heading into Christmas uncertain of their employment prospects for next year. They do not know whether they will have jobs after the closure of the Boral mill in September of next year. Those 54 workers are complimented by another 18 or 20 workers who are contracted to the Boral mill for the cutting and carting of timber to the Nandroya mill at Cooroy.

All of those families have been affected by the Premier's RFA announcement on 17 September. I wish to read into Hansard a submission that I sent to the Premier in October, following the announcement of the RFA on 16 September, on behalf of the Cooroy community and the workers affected by the RFA announcement. Heading into Christmas, those men and their families face uncertain employment prospects next year. The submission stated—

"On September 16th, The Premier The Hon Peter Beattie, in announcing the release of the long awaited Regional Forest Agreement, effectively spelt out the demise of the Boral Timber Mill, at Cooroy, as a working entity.

In his statement, The Premier, said, 'This is a win win for timber workers, the timber towns; the environment.'

'What we are doing is improving on the Regional Forest Agreement process by safeguarding the jobs not for 10 years, 20 years or 50 years—but for hundreds of years. Any timber worker who wants a job in the timber industry, will have a job in the timber industry.

The central elements of the plan are:-

at least 350 extra jobs.

an increase of 425,000 hectares in the amount of native forest protected from logging.

the planting of 10 million trees.

an end to all logging in native forests by the year 2024.

Mr. Beattie said the Government sought a balance between conservation for future generations and the preservation of jobs in rural communities now, and the end result achieved those ends.

The key parts to the agreement are:

all but three of the timber mills— Nandroya, Dingo and Yarraman— currently using Crown timber from South East Queensland to receive logging allocations at their current rate for the next 25 years.

Government buys out all the timber operations of Boral Ltd., in Queensland.

the planting of 10 million trees by the Government: active efforts to encourage plantings from the private sector.

\$10 million to encourage new investment in the value-adding side of the hardwood sector-measure such as retooling and kiln drying.

a transition to plantation forests over 25 years so that after that time, there will be no logging of crown forests in south-east Queensland.

'In the meantime, this decision also means that many of those rural communities which rely on timber will remain viable and keep their timber jobs in those towns, which means they also keep their other services such as their schools or ambulance services'.

Mr. Beattie went on to say; 'many new extra jobs would come from the timber industry having the confidence to invest in its long term future by having resource security for 25 years and beyond, which is far more stable than the current regime.'

He said new jobs would come from:

241 jobs proposed at Maryborough-based Hyne and Son through the expansion of its soft wood operation.

100 jobs in the management of the public and private sector plantations that will be planted to provide for the long term future of the industry.

100 jobs in the management of the expanded conservation reserve.

30 jobs in the Gympie region from the installation of a second line at the medium density fibreboard (MDF) Laminex factory.

'This total of 471 new jobs offsets potential job losses of 80 in Noosa's immediate hinterland' Mr. Beattie said.

But the timber employees and their families and the people of Cooroy question the validity of these claims.

New Jobs:

When will these proposed jobs become available and where precisely are they all locate?

If there are to be Jobs in Maryborough, which is 2 hours from Cooroy, when will they become available; what guarantees do Boral workers have that any new jobs at Hyne & Son will become available to Cooroy workers:

Because of the 2 hour distance from Cooroy, this will mean relocation by the Cooroy workers. Will there be relocation compensation available.

The proposed new softwood plant at Hyne & Son, if it does come to fruition, will be computer operated and thus have no need of 241 workers. What guarantees will the Premier give that these jobs will eventuate and when they eventuate.

They are advised that the Laminex factory does not and will not, have 30 new and extra jobs at their Gympie plant, as they propose to shut down one moulding line and any staff needs will come from their own current staff.

Will the State Government spell out in detail where the new prospects for jobs and where these new opportunities exist and when will these job opportunities be available.

100 New conservation management jobs have been promised. How many will be positioned at Cooroy. Where are these new jobs situated and where is the budget allocation for these alleged positions.

100 Plantation Jobs, Again where are these jobs to be situated, When will they become available. Where is the information on sites, availability and training for the jobs. Has any tenders been advertised, let or contracts signed to establish these plantations and if not when will this occur.

Some job opportunities may become available with Value Adding to timber products at the existing mill, before the close down date. But our belief is that this will depend very much on financial support from the Government and will have minimal effect on job losses.

It is relevant that the Department of State Development, the Government department responsible for implementing this agreement, has set up a Shop Front at Cooroy to 'assist' Cooroy workers with the task of finding new work in the timber industry.

All that these people are providing is a service that takes details of the enquirer and then refers these Timber workers and their data, to Centrelink etc. a task they can do themselves.

The Cooroy timber workers have no confidence in this Office's ability or commitment, to find these Timber workers, the only timber millers effected by the Agreement, jobs, that have been promised in the timber or allied industry as proposed by Mr. Beattie and Mr. Elder, in their announcement statements.

The Major Issues For the Timber Workers are:

Future employment opportunities in the timber industry and where.

Boral's commitment to maintain work at their mill until September 2000.

Part of the Enterprise Bargaining Agreement be that workers be paid a redundancy rate of 2 weeks pay for every year of employment.

That there is currently no commitment from Boral that any employee who leaves the Mill before the termination of activities in September 2000, will receive any redundancy or other entitlements.

Thus any worker offered a new job and accepts, before the mill closes, could lose redundancy allowances. Thus it is imperative that this commitment be forth coming to all employees, so that jobs, if they become available may be taken, without penalty.

Employees are keen to receive all payouts when termination takes place so that they can get on with their life plans.

Ensure that in the event of any workers who are prime operators, who leave before the termination of the Mill closing date, does not effect the viability of the remaining jobs for current employees, by pre-empting the mill closure. Such closure action will have a drastic effect on the workers and their families who remain.

Currently there is a lack of confidence and certainty for the timber workers and their families. They are concerned about home mortgages, schooling for their children the incomes from working wives that are a major part of the families' economic well being. What guarantees are these people offered by the Beattie proposals, and what if any, special packages are being proposed.

Redundancy Packages

When the Goss Labor Government closed down the milling industry on Fraser Island in 1991 the then State Government and the relevant Unions, provided redundancy packages to the Fraser Island workers.

On this occasion, neither the State government or the relevant unions, especially the Australian Workers Union, has made any mention of compensation packages to the Cooroy timber workers.

Indeed, both bodies have been particularly silent on this matter.

It is our contention, that a number of the mill workers, possibly up to half of the work force would consider accepting a just, yet substantial package, in company with the payout package negotiated with Boral Ltd.

This would sever their association with the timber industry and allow them to undertake new ventures for themselves, as well as considering the futures of people, with long service at the mill, who will find it difficult to be placed in the work force, in Cooroy or any where else.

Given that the average work service is about 14 years, if 30 men took the package as proposed below, the total payout to the State would be in the order of \$1.5 million.

This would relieve the pressure on the State Government to find the promised jobs and would further relieve the onus on the Community Working Task Force, to find replacement positions for the workers, by reducing the need to find jobs in the immediate vicinity to Cooroy, down to 30 Jobs, rather than the current 80 plus work positions.

If a package adjusted to today's dollar value was to be considered on the basis of that offered to the mill workers on Fraser Island and the Great Sandy region in 1991, then the following may be acceptable, and is worthy of strenuous consideration, by the State Government."

As the local member, my proposal on behalf of the workers at the Boral mills in Cooroy was: 10 to 15 years' service, a compensation package of \$40,000; 15 to 20 years' service, a compensation package of \$50,000; and 20-plus years' service, a compensation package of \$60,000. Such a package would not only be just and, in many cases, acceptable; it would recognise that those timberworkers in the industry on the Sunshine Coast were asked—indeed forced—to bear the brunt of the State Government's solution to the task of implementing a forest agreement. It should be pointed out and made abundantly clear that Boral Limited was placed in the position of having to make the decision to sell its operation to the Government because that Government had withdrawn the greater proportion of the timber allocations, thus making the company's future existence in the industry non-viable. Boral Limited had no choice. The timberworkers of Cooroy had no say in any agreement and thus are the lambs led to the slaughter. They are the victims of Government policy. As the innocent party to those agreements, they are now entitled to special consideration for their and their family's future needs.

I cannot believe that Government members have applauded the Premier's RFA announcement. They are fully aware that the timberworkers at Cooroy and their families are affected by that decision. Given the questions that we asked in this House in October and the motion that we debated at 6

o'clock involving the Premier, the Deputy Premier and other Government members, I cannot believe that they do not understand the impact that they have had on these people. These blokes have been working at the Cooroy mill for up to 25 years. They are long-serving employees of Boral. The timber industry is the only industry they know. They are skilled workers. They are committed and hardworking men. They are members of the Cooroy community and the wider community and they involve themselves in many community organisations and activities. They make a contribution to their community. In many cases, they are second and third generation timberworkers. These men are committed to their families. Many of their wives have jobs in the Cooroy area, and they will be impacted upon if they have to leave the Cooroy area. Many of them have children in schools in Cooroy, and these children will also be impacted on if they have to leave the Cooroy area and move to another school. Many of them have friends and sporting interests in Cooroy. The Government has ignored these men throughout the whole process.

As well as that submission, I want to read into Hansard a letter I wrote to the Premier on 1 October after the announcement of the RFA. It said—

"Dear Premier

Re: Closure of Boral Timber Mill— Cooroy.

In media reports and Press Releases from yourself and Deputy Premier, Hon. Jim Elder, about the imminent closure of the above Timber Milling operation, in October 2000, much has been made of the 'jobs' that will be available to the retrenched staff, of this company.

Specifically you and the Deputy Premier, have indicated that these staff members will find jobs in a number of places, specifically:-

Hyne and Son Maryborough 241

Laminex Industries Gympie 30

Private and Public Plantation Management 100

Expanded Conservation Reserve 100"—

That totals 471 jobs. The letter continues—

"It has also been stated that 10 million trees will be planted in South East Queensland.

Premier, in the short time since your announcement regarding the Regional Forestry Agreement I have had a number of discussions and meetings with workers affected by the closure of Boral Mill in Cooroy.

There have been a number of statements by Trade Union representatives and local Councillors in regards to the future employment prospects of these effected workers. None of that has brought any certainty to these men as far as their futures are concerned.

I do appreciate that the Department of State Development has opened an office in Cooroy to identify future employment prospects; and I am advised there has been little success in this regard to date.

Therefore, it is of urgent importance to myself, the Mayor of Noosa, Cr. Bob Abbot and a deputation of the effected workers at this Mill that we meet with you to discuss these issues.

There is a public meeting scheduled for Tuesday evening the 5th October 1999 and it would be greatly appreciated if we could inform the workers at this meeting that you would be prepared to meet with them for this deputation.

I look forward to a response by the close of business on Tuesday, 5th October 1999."

That letter requesting a meeting with the Premier on behalf of the Mayor of Noosa Council, Bob Abbot, and on behalf of the workers who will lose their jobs at Boral mill was sent to the Premier on 1 October. I have not even had a response. That is how much the Premier cares about these men who will lose their jobs at Cooroy. He has not even bothered to respond. My office has rung his office, looking for a response and to date we have not been able to get a response or a commitment from the Premier to meet with these men who will lose their jobs or the Mayor of Noosa, who feels and understands the enormous pressure that these men are under going into Christmas. The Premier has not even bothered to respond to that letter requesting a meeting.

I cannot believe that the Premier stood in this House and made a grandstanding announcement on the RFA and totally neglected those men at Cooroy, their families and all the other people connected with them who will lose their jobs as a result of that announcement. There has been no commitment from this Government, the Premier or the Minister for State Development, the Honourable Jim Elder—no commitment from any Minister in this Government—to those men in Cooroy. Many of those men in Cooroy are members of the AWU; many have been members for 14 to 20 years; many of those blokes have marched for that union; many of those blokes believed in that union; and

many of those blokes thought that the leader of the AWU in this House, Jim Elder, would have taken up the cause on behalf of them and their families.

There has been not one word from the Deputy Premier. He will not go to Cooroy. He has been invited to go to Cooroy and talk to those blokes, but there has been not one word out of him. He does not care. There are 54 members up there who are facing Christmas with the uncertainty of future employment prospects and we cannot even get a meeting with the Deputy Premier. We cannot get a meeting with the Premier. How the hell do they expect these blokes to go into Christmas with their families—their wives, kids, mothers, fathers and friends—with the uncertainty of not knowing what the future holds for them?

I cannot believe that the members on that side of the House sit there, knowing the perils that these blokes are going to face, knowing the pressures they are under and knowing the impacts on their lives from not knowing where the next dollars are going to come from next year to pay their mortgages and to fulfil their life's dreams. It is time that the Premier and the Deputy Premier realised that these are real people—real, fair dinkum, hardworking Aussie blokes. All they want is a commitment from Government that they are going to have work in the future. They have worked all their lives. Many of them have worked as hard as any man I know. They are hardworking men. They want a commitment from the Government on their futures and those of their families.

Even the Noosa branch of the Labor Party sent me a letter on 18 November. It is from Mr Lourey, secretary of the Noosa district branch. The letter states—

"Dear Mr. Davidson,

In the Noosa News of 15th November 1999, you are reported as being 'highly sceptical that the jobs will be provided in the Maryborough operations which he (ie you) believes will be fully automated'.

The members of the Noosa District Branch ALP, are determined to keep the Queensland State Labor Government, to its word and provide the full number of jobs promised with the South East Regional Forestry Agreement. We are willing to follow up any breach or possible breach of the agreement and request you provide us with the substantial information upon which you base your belief.

We assure you we will act on any hard evidence that the government is not keeping its word to the workers and people of Cooroy, or that the promised jobs are not there and immediately will call the government to account.

We place the wellbeing of the workers of Cooroy first and will fight to ensure their security.

Your prompt reply would be appreciated as we wish immediately to act upon any such information."

That is a letter from Mr E. Lourey, the secretary of the Noosa district branch of the ALP. He understands the issue affecting these blokes at Cooroy. He understands my involvement in fighting for these blokes at Cooroy. He understands that the community is so annoyed with the Government because of its inaction and lack of commitment. He understands the impact on these men's lives. He understands what their wives are going through. He understands what the kids are going through—the uncertainty of their schooling and sporting involvement—and he himself cannot get an answer or commitment from the ALP.

In response to Mr Lourey's letter, a Mr Russell Shipp, who is the President of the Cooroy branch of the Forestry Protection Society wrote in response to Mr Lourey's letter that was published in the paper. He said—

"Accolades for Davo.

I would like to respond to E. Lourey's letter dated November 22, Noosa News. Yes, it's time to put the people first which is exactly what Bruce Davidson has done.

As our local member it is his job to respond to our needs.

Should we vote for a member who isn't willing to stand up for our rights and needs, he is the only one who has shown respect to us by asking what it is we want and need.

Sure the state government may have full time staff floating around, but not one of them has approached me and asked me what I need.

If we visit the shop front in Cooroy we are asked to fill in a form and go on a list, so I'm not sure what full time staff are actually employed for other than preaching the same tired dialect for the past two months concerning jobs.

So I applaud Mr Davidson for his help and recognition of our needs.

The ALP has been approached many times via letters, meetings etc and still we await any response.

So I see no 'smart alec politics' just smart politics with our member doing his job."

Mr Russell Shipp, the President of the Forest Protection Society in Cooroy, worked at the Boral mill for 14 years. He was a member of the AWU. He cannot even get any answers from the Government or his rep on the AWU. He is uncertain as to what he can tell those other men as the union rep in that mill in relation to what the Government is going to do. He cannot give any commitments on job prospects or on the prospects of future wealth for those families. He cannot advise them what their wives or kids are going to be doing next year. He cannot get a meeting with anyone from the Government. He cannot get a meeting with Jim Elder, the number cruncher in this House for the AWU.

When is this Government going to listen to these blokes at Cooroy? When is the Premier and the head number cruncher for the AWU, the Deputy Premier, going to listen to these blokes? They should go up there and talk to them. Rob Borbidge, the Leader of the Opposition, went up there. We spent two hours talking over issues and what we could do—raising these issues in Parliament, writing letters to the paper, attracting interest in the media—to ensure that the Government is brought to account on behalf of these men and their wives, kids and futures.

It is about time that the Premier stopped grandstanding on the announcement of the RFA and started considering the personal and human factor in this issue. These blokes, as I have said, have worked at that mill for 14, 15, 20 and 25 years. These are blokes who go to work at 5 o'clock in the morning, work their guts out all day, sweat like pigs and work as hard as they possibly can to maintain the competitiveness of that mill, to keep it viable and to make sure that their jobs are safe. They have been doing that for 10, 15, 25 and 30 years, and what has this Government done in two months? It will not grant them a meeting; it will not answer their letters; it will not answer my letters; and it will not respond to my requests for an invitation for the Mayor of Noosa to attend a deputation for those men because it does not care. It does not care about the workers.

It is out there celebrating its RFA announcement and all that that will embrace with the Greens. I am saying to the Government, "What about the blokes? What about their families? What about their wives? What about their futures? What about their houses? What about their own aspirations in life?" These blokes, in common with other honourable members and me, aspire to a better life. They aspire to have a holiday, pay off their mortgage and make a contribution to their community. For the people opposite to sit over there and not respond to their needs is a disgrace. It is an absolute disgrace! I will circulate this speech to every member of that mill in Cooroy.

Time expired.
