



Speech by

Mrs D. PRATT

MEMBER FOR BARAMBAH

Hansard 3 December 1999

FORESTRY AMENDMENT BILL

Mrs PRATT (Barambah—IND) (3.55 p.m.): In speaking against the Forestry Amendment Bill, I intend to address the Minister's second-reading speech. I am assuming that that speech is the Minister's summation of the Bill and thus collates his reasons why he thinks that members sensitive to the emotions within their electorates and the timber industry should vote for it. While doing so, I record that I am aware that the Premier and the Deputy Premier led the activity up to the signing of the so-called RFA agreement and that sawmillers are currently still trying to consult with the Deputy Premier.

For me, the Minister's speech serves to highlight the reasons why I cannot vote for the Bill. It identifies the reasons that this process is causing so much angst in the South-East Queensland RFA area. I can assure the Minister that opposition to this Bill is just starting, but it is growing very rapidly. Angst is changing to anger. I believe that this Minister has been left holding the baby. This Bill and the vegetation legislation may light a bushfire in the bush that will be very hard to put out. I say that, yet I acknowledge that this Minister does try to listen. However, on this issue the intense consultation on the ground never occurred. It is still not occurring.

Why are timber industry members not more vocal? They are not more vocal because industry participants are scared of retaliation. An agreement has been signed by one representative of the timber industry. This morning the Premier stated that the industry was satisfied with the agreement signed by the Queensland Timber Board. With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to read extracts from one member of the QTB circulated to all members of the QTB. The wording of these extracts has been changed somewhat to conceal the identity of the writer, for fear of retribution. In essence the letter says—

Mr Hayward: If you have changed it, how can you say it was written by one person?

Mrs PRATT: I did not say that it was a quote. I said that the extract was changed to protect his identity. In essence it states—

We feel that a special meeting should have been called to discuss the Government's proposal. Further an industry wide vote on the proposal should have taken place. The invitation to the meeting on the 15/9/99 only suggested a briefing and that feedback would be provided. A short meeting is not adequate. There are many questions to be asked and answered. We are very disappointed in the way the QTB handled this problem.

I ask the Minister: does he truly believe that that lone signature is now truly representative of the desires of the whole industry? Now that all industry members have had time to consider the consequences of that agreement that was signed on their behalf by their industry body, the situation has changed. Judging by the avalanche of phone calls that members in the South-East Queensland RFA area are receiving from industry participants, I suggest it is not truly representative and that the industry is in a state of paralytic shock.

I will start with the Minister's conclusions and work my way forward to his premises. Incorrect premises can lead only to faulty conclusions. Faulty conclusions result in unachievable aims, objectives, and promises. Information that we are currently receiving regarding recent QDPI studies suggests strongly that the assumptions regarding security of supply for 25 years are now in severe doubt and are forcing responsible QDPI foresters into decisions that are not in the best interests of this State. I raise the question that if industry members undertake development and expenditure based on the

Government's guarantee of supply and that supply is not forthcoming, is the Government exposed to a class action?

The Minister concluded with the statement—

"In view of the lengthy consultation with the various industry bodies that has preceded the development of this Bill, I expect wholehearted support from all members of this House for this Bill."

Time involved in consultation does not guarantee representative opinion. A truly representative opinion can be achieved only by a truly statistically significant sampling process. I challenge this unfortunate Minister, who has been left holding the baby, to prove to me that he is supporting a decision which is truly representative of the industry. It is obvious that this Bill does not enjoy the wholehearted support of all members of this House. More importantly, the opposition to this Bill by the people on whom it impacts is accelerating and intensifying very rapidly. On Monday of this week the shire chairmen and councillors from 16 shires in south-east Queensland met in Gympie with industry participants and parliamentarians. There were 50 people in all, and only opposition for this Bill was evident— just a growing list of concerns and anger, and I stress "anger".

The Minister is on record as saying that his extensive consultation process involved a steering committee, a stakeholder reference panel and eight subcommittees involving 97 selected representatives from a range of organisations. The question is: to whom did he or the Premier listen? Such a structure does not guarantee adequate and representative consultation. The member for Maryborough has been heavily involved in the sustained and unsuccessful efforts of responsible silviculturists and SGP holders to be heard. He advises me that the results to date have been very disappointing. The plethora of reports— which we are told cost \$11m—are largely the result of desk studies, not studies in the field and talking with industry operators. Herein lies their inherent weakness, and this weakness explains the unrealistic conclusions and the omissions which are now steadily emerging.

These unrealistic conclusions are now forcing some professional foresters to make recommendations which I am sure they would not make in a non-political arena. The Minister or the Premier compounded this methodological weakness by suddenly concluding an agreement with a timber industry representative, who has since resigned, and three Greens. This agreement does not flow logically from the \$11m worth of reports or from the statements during the industry road show led by Rod McInnis and Selena Walters with the support of the AWU. Thus, I am not surprised that the first motion supported unanimously by 16 shires at the meeting last Monday was that "consultation at the local level was inadequate, particularly immediately prior to signing the current Queensland agreement". This cannot be called a representative agreement.

The member for Maryborough again expressed concern with the process in this House on 27 May 1999. Cooloola Shire modelling by MaCarthur Consultants had demonstrated that, if access to 60% of the State hardwood forest was denied to Cooloola, then employment would fall from 229 to 42 and annual gross income would fall from \$9.5m to \$2.2m—very significant figures within the Cooloola economy. The Minister should go to Cooloola and talk to those involved in the industry now or delay a decision on this Bill. Considering the range over which Cooloola Shire contractors work, it already appears that they have lost more than 60% access under this non-representative agreement because of the prohibition on logging in the productive wet sclerophyll forest area south of Cooloola. Thus, Cooloola Shire could be facing the loss of 180 jobs and \$7m annual income from next year onwards. So much for jobs, jobs, jobs.

There was not enough consultation with practical timber industry people to identify the real impacts of closing the wet sclerophyll area—an area that is more resilient than most. Recent QDPI calculations regarding the ability to supply sawlogs for the next 25 years, as guaranteed, have raised severe concerns within QDPI, so much so that they are considering the sale of poles as sawlogs, and that is resource misuse. The Deputy Premier and Mr Chris Braggs from the QDPI know that there is already a shortage of poles, especially long poles. Hynes and Dale & Meyers supply over 90% of the poles used in this State. Those two companies and Energex have told the Deputy Premier that there will be supply problems. Wooden bridge girders are already a problem, as mentioned earlier.

A cement pole generally costs five times what a timber pole costs. Currently, Energex are looking for \$2m worth of power poles. If cement has to be used, that will mean a budget blow-out to \$10m, not considering the additional costs of insulators on cement poles, and that will cause some discomfort to another Minister from Mount Isa. The Minister claims—

"This Bill is designed to provide for critical long term security to the forest and timber industry, and for rural and regional communities."

The probable loss of 187 jobs within the Cooloola Shire is not making that shire feel very secure. That was very evident on Monday last and at another meeting within this building this week. The Minister states that sawlog access has been guaranteed for 25 years, and the fact that a mill which wants to sell

out has to give this Government first offer helps underwrite this guarantee. As I have said already, the QDPI currently has severe doubts. Many experienced timber managers are not convinced. In fact, the supply graph has been re-drawn by a very experienced operator and shows a significant shortfall in supply in the year 2020.

But what about round products? The suppliers of poles and other round products, and for that matter sleepers, have no security. Most of the long poles come from the wet sclerophyll area. Contractors are—or were— allowed to cut seven poles per hectare within areas where the tree density averages around 100 per hectare. It is difficult to see where harvesters have been. The Minister claims that the public benefits outweigh the costs. He claims that forestry reserves will be used in a manner to ensure efficient production and utilisation of the national estate. Well, let us look at the comparative value of poles and sawlogs. A 14 metre, 12 kilonewton tree without a pipe cut as a sawlog is worth about \$15, but cut as a pole it is worth around \$100. In general, a tree cut as a pole is worth about five times its value as a sawlog. I ask members: is recommending the sale of poles as sawlogs likely to maximise the value of the resource? By denying round product suppliers access, the value of sound trees suitable for use as poles decreases by a factor of five. The Queensland market takes 25,000 poles a year. A long pole can be worth as much as \$700 in the paddock.

The Government's rationale for locking up 1,000,000 acres of State forest and causing more pain and hardship in the bush is the claim that the current rate of sawlog harvesting cannot be maintained. What a defeatist attitude from the Smart State. This rationale flies in the face of an increasing body of scientific evidence. The QDPIF manages the State forests at a cost of \$20 per hectare per year. It is well known that both staff numbers and budget for the forestry department have been steadily decreased during recent years. QDPIF used to practice silviculture and thus improve the yield of State forests and maintain the value of the national estate, but not now.

We know that south-east Queensland hardwood forests are slow growing, but slow growing hardwood is high quality hardwood. Now, about 35% of the 338,000 hectares controlled by the QDPIF have a mean annual increment of less than 0.1 cubic metres per hectare per year and a low growing capacity, generally from two to five cubic metres of standing sawlog per hectare. The sustainable yield from equivalent forests in similar environments in northern New South Wales is three times as much under their silvicultural practices. Surely the Premier is not content to see New South Wales outperform Queensland by so much.

Silvipastoralists—people who sustainably nurture and harvest both cattle and trees from the same land—near Maryborough are currently outproducing neighbouring forestry land by a factor of five—that is, the forestry produces one cube from 20 acres and a silviculturist next door sustainably produces one cube from four acres. This man and others like him know every tree in the same way as they know their family. They maintain habitat trees. It is grossly insulting to imply that such people are environmentally irresponsible. Only the Greens who are city based could draw such inferences.

About 62% of south-east Queensland native timber sawlogs come from private land, generally land owned by graziers who often plant grasses and, more importantly, legumes and lower the canopy density so that the pasture and the trees thrive. Many such graziers now use a CSIRO designed computer program to calculate the optimum density of the trees. Such an optimum density of trees and pasture is the best deterrent to soil loss. Would the Greens disapprove of this? I think not. Did the RFA backbench committee inspect any such properties? I think not. Can they believe that such people get immense pleasure out of their trees and their property? I think not.

The threat of the vegetation legislation has panicked some silvipastoralists into cutting trees that they normally would not cut. Can we in all fairness blame them? Does the Minister realise that many graziers have nurtured trees for years? These trees are their superannuation and often their insurance against unexpected family crises. One grazier has nurtured mill timber currently worth \$60,000 on 900 acres of poor soil. When a grazier purchases freehold land he purchases the timber and the right to harvest that timber. How does a Government fairly compensate such people? South Australia tried different formulas and eventually gave up. Does the Minister have the answer? Has he thought that far or is he being rushed into this?

It is assumed that the Government has been heavily influenced by the Greens in the framing of this agreement and this Bill. The thrust of this Bill is to eventually ensure supply by plantations only. The study *Global Outlook for Plantations*, written for ABARE in 1999, states—

"The level of present information on plantations means that any projections of future supply should be considered with caution."

It also states—

"The transformation ... to plantations can result in simplified ecosystems, given that most plantations are of a single species.

...

Further, any exotic plantation species may not support the understorey of native vegetation, fauna and soil micro-organisms"—

that are commonly endemic and essential, resulting in decrease of biodiversity. It goes on to say that poor decisions concerning site and plantation design and management can result in significant environmental damage. It continues—

"Most tropical soils, as well as being highly erodible, are intrinsically poor in nutrients and rely on a rapidly decomposing humus layer to supply nutrients and to protect the soil from erosion."

Heavy machinery disturbance can be rapidly detrimental. Insecticides, essential for eucalypts in Queensland, herbicides and fertilisers required to achieve good yields can affect the quality of local water supply and aquatic life. It goes on—

"Plantations can also increase the risk of disease and pest infestation."

These can easily spread to neighbouring native forest. And further—

"Exotic plantation species have also been known to spread into surrounding areas of natural forest, where they may compete with local vegetation or hybridise it. Such hybridisation may result in the loss of valuable and unique adaptive features among native local species."

This includes suitability as native fauna habitat. I will finish my contribution to this debate, having identified the above risks to the Minister and the greens. For the Minister's sake, I hope the Treasurer increases his budget to allow him to have the qualified and experienced staff necessary to assist and supervise the Queensland hardwood plantation.

This is an issue that covers an enormous area and an enormous number of people, and many shires will be affected. The Premier says that he has the support of the all of the mayors. I ask that he be brought up to date on the true situation. There is a saying: you can fool some of the people some of the time but you cannot fool all of the people all the time. The Premier has been misled on this issue. The mayors have read through the documentation and found it wanting. This is not an agreement acceptable to those who are supposedly the beneficiaries of the RFA. I ask the Premier to proceed with extreme caution on this issue. This is one of those times when discretion will be far more beneficial than valour.
