



Speech by

**Mr DOUG SLACK**

**MEMBER FOR BURNETT**

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Hansard 3 December 1999

### **FORESTRY AMENDMENT BILL**

**Mr SLACK** (Burnett—NPA) (4.12 p.m.): It is quite obvious from the debate so far that the Forestry Amendment Bill does not have the support that the Premier, the Deputy Premier and the Minister claim that it has. It is claimed that it has wide community, conservation movement, timberworkers and timber industry support, but that is not correct. The Premier has heard that in the contributions made by members who have spoken before me. Particularly the members for Noosa and Barambah made it very clear that there are many people within the community— respectable people who understand the timber industry—who do not see this as a balanced outcome from fair negotiations between all the parties. That is very obvious by the contributions made so far.

In other words, the Bill before the House is flawed. The outcome of those negotiations is flawed. For that reason it is being rejected by a significant part of our community. The main reason the Bill is flawed—I speak from experience because I have properties and have been involved in selling timber to sawmills and in sawmills harvesting timber from those properties, particularly spotted gum, ironbark and the common hardwoods that we speak of, the sought-after timber—is that the proposal to provide the timber that will not be available from the forestry by way of plantation timber 25 years out is just not achievable. There are several reasons for that.

Hardwood timber takes a long time to grow. It has to have an environment that satisfies it. As members will appreciate, the Queensland climate is very varied. That is the nature of our climate. I cannot see that we will be able to plant the hardwood species that the sawmills require to replace the timber that they would obtain from the forests and get that timber to a millable stage within 25 years.

The Government has acquired some land but, as the member for Keppel correctly said, not one tree has been planted. There is a purchase time and a lead time. Sure, there has been talk about plantations for a long period of time. I and the Opposition have for a long time supported the need to increase the plantation estate within Queensland. It is the way to go, but the outcome of the negotiations is, from my own experience, not achievable.

We were selling timber from our property each 20 years. There were periods when the timber was prolific and we had good timber. There was a period of thinning that timber by cordoning or ringbarking and poisoning and leaving the better trees for harvesting. When we went through and did that, the remaining trees were four or five years old at least. It would take 20 years in that situation before they even got to a pole size, let alone mill size. The Government is proposing to get them to a mill size and not waste the potential of the timber itself. As the member for Barambah said, harvesting them at pole size would be a scandalous waste of a good product and not conservation minded.

This outcome was a political outcome. Honourable members should make no mistake about it. The Queensland Government initially proposed a scenario that would mean the loss of many jobs and the loss of economies within our smaller and larger country towns. It was horrific for those towns and workers. The Australian Workers Union was violently opposed to it, as was amply demonstrated to the Government.

Then the Premier was able to come from a position of saying, "This is what you are faced with. Now let us see what we can evolve out of that." From the point of view of many timber people, and I guess the timber board, the Government had a gun to their heads. An outcome that was better than the one that was being proposed was a plus for them. So it was a compromise arrangement, but not a

fair arrangement. It was an arrangement that was arrived at from a basis of "you'll do this or else". They could have been faced with something far worse. So I guess at the end of the day they capitulated, but it was not what the industry wanted. The Government will have realised that when it listened to the contribution of the member for Noosa.

The reality with plantation timber is that there is no guarantee it will be ready in 25 years. If everything were going correctly for it, I doubt it would. If we look at the coast of Queensland we will see that in the last few years there has been a long period of drought in many areas which, of course, naturally diminishes the ability of the timber to grow and mature.

We also have to contend with fires, which is a big threat in the Queensland environment. It is wrong to suggest that fires can be protected against because, at the end of the day, fires can be caused by many things. They can be caused by human intervention—by people deliberately or accidentally lighting fires—or by lightning. If an area of grassland or timberland has not been managed properly over a period of time, by recurrent burning to protect the timberland or the grassland from intensive heat for instance, at some stage or other a fire will occur.

There are thousands of acres that from time to time have experienced the devastation of uncontrolled fires. I can speak from experience with my own property. Lightning started a fire and 12 months later, in the same area, lightning started a fire there again. It was way out in the bush; there was no human intervention. I went through it on a motorbike and saw that the area was burnt. There was no way the fire could have been started other than by lightning. If we do not manage this properly—and this is happening already with the cutback in funding for forestry management—timber tracks will get run down and overgrown. And if a fire goes through an area like that, which was previously being milled and had some protection, that can cause terrific damage.

There is no doubt that, when milling is taking place and there are scars on the horizon, it can look very unsightly. But forests have an amazing way of healing. One can drive or walk through a forest that has been logged 20 years previously and hardly notice any trace of where it has been logged. There may be some old stumps, but they have usually become overgrown, and one does not see the scars or the broken and dying branches. Of course, many people who do not understand the workings of nature are horrified when they see clear-felling on television, and it does raise their emotions. Unfortunately, in this particular instance, the Premier has convinced many in the public that he has achieved a balanced outcome that everybody supports, but that is simply not the case, as members have heard.

Sure, in the past there was some indiscriminate logging. Some of our forefathers did things that they should not have done, and that has led to the perception that there has been an abuse of our forests. But let me say quite plainly that it should never be implied that loggers and timberworkers are environmental vandals. Over the century of settlement in Queensland, they did a job that they believed was in the interests of the community and was not hurting the forests in the long term. It was a sustainable industry.

In many country areas, particularly along the coast east of the Great Divide, there were many small sawmills. In my electorate, around Gayndah, there were sawmills at Pile Gully and Eli Creek. But over the years, because of the economics of the industry, they have had to close down. Those areas are now just as timbered as they ever were, because the forests have healed through regrowth.

In my time as a member of Parliament, and prior to the Goss Government in the nineties, there has been no doubt that our forestry management program was recognised as one of the world's best. So it is unfair for members to say that there has been indiscriminate clear-felling. Sure, there will always be small-scale indiscriminate abuses of conservation, despite all the rules and regulations. But it is unfair to imply that there has been indiscriminate clear-felling of timber within this State, particularly in the last few years.

Unfortunately, through the actions of this Government—not only in relation to this particular Bill and this particular forest management thrust but also in relation to people's perceptions of the tree-clearing issue—many people are panicking. They are clearing timber that they would not normally have cleared. They were beginning to understand conservation, and a natural evolution was occurring in the management of their properties. I realise that I am getting away from the issue of forestry as it relates to State forests, but this is relevant. Those people would not normally do some of the things that their forebears did out of ignorance years and years ago. I have seen that with my own neighbours and in my own approach to the management of forestry and timber on our properties. We know perfectly well that timber is a very valuable resource. It provides part of our income, and it is in our interests to preserve it for our own viability. That situation also applies to sawmills that process forestry timber. In the long term, they need that timber for a sustainable industry and to survive. So to say that there has been widespread indiscriminate logging in forests in the past few years is just garbage, and it cannot be substantiated.

There is no doubt that many communities throughout country Queensland are feeling insecure about this Bill. The workers are feeling insecure and uncertain about their future—and with every justification. Many well-meaning plans have been formulated, particularly where conservationists have been involved. This Government has a responsibility to conservationists—as we do as an Opposition. We all have a responsibility to conservation. No-one wants to see the increasing effects of greenhouse gases, carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, and raising temperatures. However, this must be done on a scientific and balanced basis. Reacting to emotion is not the way for a stable, well-meaning and intelligent Government to act, particularly when it affects workers in this State.

This Government talks about jobs, jobs, jobs, but I can assure it that it is not giving confidence to the people in the timber industry over its approach to jobs, jobs, jobs in the timber industry. As I said earlier, this has been a political solution to what needed to be a better outcome for the social interests of country Queensland, and a better outcome for the social interests of many of the larger provisional cities that depend greatly on the flow-on effect from the sawmill industry.

Unfortunately, three conservation groups, the Government and the Timber Board made this decision to arrive at a compromise. But as people start to see through it and realise its implications, they will know that the compromise will be to their disadvantage. This Government has a major public relations problem to overcome, because when it was announced by the Premier—with the involvement of the Timber Board—the general public believed that it was a good outcome from the Premier, and they gave him full credit for the fact that he had resolved a very difficult issue. But he did not really resolve a very difficult issue at all when one starts to analyse it, read the small print, see the effects of it and notice the flaws in the 25-year plantation objectives of this particular legislation. It is critical that this legislation protects those jobs in the future. And if that does not stack up, then the whole Bill itself does not stack up, and the outcome of the negotiations does not stack up.

Sure, we would all like to see some of our forests protected to ensure the development of plantation timber. But when we think about forests, we have to remember that there is a significant amount of natural forestry—our heritage—locked up in national parks. This Government claims that about 5% of our national parks are locked up. So if we add the forestry component to the national park component, that increases the area that is unable to be accessed by the timber industry and by the people of Queensland.

And all that we will get out of this, through a pending shortage of timber in the longer term, is having to import timber from interstate or overseas. And if we have to do that, we will be shifting an environmental problem that needs to be managed here to overseas or to another State where perhaps the forests have not been nearly as well managed as they have been here. Remember that Queensland was once recognised as having one of the best forestry management systems in the world.

That is without dispute. During the 1990s, when the members opposite were in Opposition and when they were in Government previously, I did not hear any of them challenge our forestry management, which was developed through many years of research in managing the State's forestry estate. This Bill is not an answer to the environmental problems that are facing the world. It is not an answer to the greenhouse effect. It is not an answer to ensuring that we preserve the forestry estate throughout the world.

We need timber and we need to recognise that it is a renewable resource. Forests do regrow after the timber is harvested. As I said, after a forest has been harvested, it can appear a little ugly, but it heals, and it heals very quickly. With those few words, members could understand why the Opposition has serious reservations about this Bill and why it says that, in many respects, it is flawed.

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