



Speech by

HOWARD HOBBS

MEMBER FOR WARREGO

Hansard 3 December 1999

FORESTRY AMENDMENT BILL

Mr HOBBS (Warrego—NPA) (11.49 a.m.): The objectives of this Bill are to amend the Forestry Act 1959 specifically to implement part of the Queensland Government's plan, which includes 25-year agreements, for the South-East Queensland Regional Forest Agreement and to extend the legislative exemption from the provisions of the Commonwealth's Trade Practices Act 1974. The intention of the RFA was to remove uncertainty from the industry. Year after year, we saw annual protests in the forest. The industry had difficulty managing the ongoing uncertainty, so a measure had to be put in place. That is the reason the RFA was put together. The funding was provided on a shared basis by the Federal and State Governments. The industry was very suspicious, but willing. It went into consultations with a genuine and willing attitude to try to resolve the ongoing problem of uncertainty. Only 2.5% of Queensland is reserved for forestry purposes. Queensland imports 35% of its timber requirements. That is \$200m worth of wood and wood products. Including paper products, the figure is \$500m. Those figures represent a huge expenditure on resources—which we presently import from overseas—that can be sourced from within Queensland.

As Minister in the very early stages of the RFA process, I took the opportunity to go overseas to look at sustainable forest management, forest allocation, certification and labelling. I went with a group which consisted of people from the Timber Board and other individuals who had a lot of expertise in the forest industry, including Aila Keto. We looked at places in Canada, such as Vancouver Island, and Sweden. We tried to find world's best practice and the best forest management strategy around the world so we could use some of those ideas in Queensland. An interesting person we met on the trip was a man called Patrick Moore, who was in fact one of the founders of Greenpeace. His view was that logging in Canada in those days was not sustainable. He felt that there needed to be huge changes to the attitudes of millers and loggers; hence, Greenpeace was formed.

Greenpeace conducted its activities for a number of years—I do not know how long it was, perhaps 10 years. Eventually, Patrick Moore said to his troops, "Guess what? We have achieved what we wanted to do. They are now logging in a sustainable manner. We need to scale down our operation and wind the whole thing back because, as far as I can see, we have achieved what we set out to do." At that time, Greenpeace was getting a head of steam up because it was receiving money from Europe. Its members were on the uranium bandwagon; they were sailing the seven seas in Warrior and Warrior II and so on. It seemed as if they were on a high and they felt that they should keep going, so they did.

Patrick Moore is a very knowledgeable person of the forest industry, and he still works in that industry. We looked at a lot of examples overseas, particularly in Canada, of what were considered to be disaster areas many years before. We looked to see what damage had been done to the ecosystems and to the landscape and what erosion and geological and ecological changes may have occurred. The interesting thing was that most of that country had rejuvenated very well. In fact, it was pointed out to us that phenomena like this are fairly natural in a lot of ways. There are glacial movements over the centuries and huge fires. Also, Canada has a huge storm once every 100 years which wipes out 90 miles of coastline and whole mountain sides. That is not dissimilar to clear felling in some areas.

We found out that clear felling can occur in many areas but not on a large scale. I am not saying for one minute that people can go out and clear fell the whole lot, but certainly clear felling in some areas is an option. For instance, some ecosystems require light. While those ecosystems are there all the time, some of them cannot get going and thrive because they need light. After the area has been clear felled and the light comes in, they flourish. As the forest grows, they slowly move on to the next area, and on it goes. At the end of the day, it is a revolving cycle that involves all sorts of ecosystems. We looked at all sorts of forests on that trip. It had been said that 50% of species are extinct in some of those areas. Patrick Moore challenged anyone to name the ecosystems that have disappeared because of logging and other actions of the timber industry under the sort of sustainable activity we in Australia have. He believes there is none.

The other interesting point made on that trip related to old-growth forests. I am not suggesting for one minute that we should get rid of all the old growth. Somebody else we met on that trip said that there were some realities relating to old growth. They said—

"Old growth is not a snapshot in time of botanical utopia. It is a dynamic state which can be managed. Our challenge is to convince the population it can be done."

That person was saying that the first 30 or 40 years of life of a forest is very good. The next 20 or 30 years are not as good. Consequently, it continues until such time as the cycle is completed again. While some of the older trees are magnificent and we would not want to get rid of them, the fact is that they grow old and in some cases, but not all, do more harm to the forest.

The other area we looked at was Sweden, which was also very interesting. The country was pretty well clear felled way before the turn of the century. It has since been replanted. I think it might have been in the 1920s, or even before that, that they went out and virtually replanted the whole of the country. Hence, there is very little of the original forests left. However, it is interesting to note the huge increase in standing volume of their forests. In the 1920s there was about 1,500 million cubic metres whereas in 1999 there is probably 3,000 cubic metres. They have virtually doubled their capacity in that time. The industry is really quite huge.

The other interesting thing about Sweden is that there is no problem with people working in the forest and hunting and gathering in the forest. In fact, it is encouraged. People hunt moose, roe deer, red deer, hare, rabbit, fox, bear and grouse. This hunting occurs on a regular basis; people are allowed to do that. They manage human activity and the animals in the forest, as well as the forest itself. That is something that we need to look at, because we tend to want to lock everything up and leave it. Forests are not managed; they are locked up.

Investment in the Swedish forest industry in 1996 totalled 15 billion krona—the highest level ever. Between 1995 and 1997, approximately 45 billion krona was invested. That is almost a quarter of the total investment made by industry in Sweden. So it is a huge area. Those people do know what they are talking about. It was very interesting to see that. Experience there also shows that it is possible to combine rational forestry with good nature conservation, however, certain endangered species demand that larger areas of associated land are completely set aside for forestry. Some 3% of the Swedish forest land has been set aside voluntarily. In addition, some 4% has been set aside as part of nature preservation measures at felling time. In overall terms they do not put aside a lot, but they are able to manage the systems they have. We seem to have an attitude that we have to lock up everything. It is just not practical or sensible.

It is obvious that in the south-east region the stakeholders—the councils and the mill workers—are waking up to the lack of substance in the RFA for the south-east corner. Obviously a deal was done between the four greens and the Timber Board—that is, the Australian Rainforest Society, the Queensland Conservation Council, the Wilderness Society, the Queensland Government and the Timber Board. There is one industry group and the rest are all a bunch of greenies. That is in the Bill.

Mr Borbidge: One is the husband of one of the others.

Mr HOBBS: One is the husband of one of the others, as the Leader of the Opposition says. What is being done is not even credible. What about the rest of the people? Does anybody else exist in this game?

Mr Seeney: What about local government?

Mr HOBBS: The Local Government Association has not even been consulted. Today in the House Mr Elder tried to justify it, talking about mill security and things like that. I understand that the chairman of the Timber Board—Mr McNamara, I think his name is—is no longer there. It is no wonder. I would not think he would be able to survive, quite frankly, after what has been done. This is one of the most unbelievable things I have seen an industry do. At the end of the day, Boral is the one that has come out with the sting. It has the dough and it is off. The Government is the sucker at the end of the day. It has paid the money over. It is quite unbelievable that a situation such as that could arise.

The lack of consultation is one of the very interesting aspects of this issue. The whole framework of the RFA process was based on consultation. Then, when we finally got close to a decision, there had to be more final consultation. In the end, the Government locked out the main stakeholders. There was no need to lock them out. It should have kept them in. If it had, there would have been a better result.

Twenty-five years is too short for hardwood. Those opposite cannot keep that promise. For a start, one needs to recommence after seeding. Trevor Perrett and I started working on getting another 30,000 hectares of plantation timber in place. It is an enormous job. In fact, in a couple of cases we had some forestry land that was not being used and which we wanted to try to utilise. It takes a long time to do it. We also had some sugarcane land that had been swapped around and we were working our way through that. Even today, that land still has not been planted. Nothing has been done by the Government. The other day the Minister for Primary Industries mentioned that there is some plantation work under way, but it is minimal and a long way from where it has to be.

Mr Palaszczuk: A thousand hectares next year.

Mr HOBBS: That is what is proposed. We have to wait and see whether that happens. It takes a long time, and it may not get that far. The Government should have used people with experience. There are hundreds of years of knowledge in the forest industry out there and the Government really has not used it. The attitude of the Government seems to be that it knows best.

The social impact is important. The Forest Protection Society and the departmental people went out with a genuine desire to consult with people and to work through the impacts. At each one of those towns, they had to go through and say, "If this happens here, what will be the impact on you? Where do you shop?" They had to determine the impacts on business in those towns. Basically, that has been wasted because this Government came in over the top and locked it up. It did not have to lock it up at all. It was purely a sell-out.

It is quite clear what happened at the beginning, particularly with the factions within the Labor Party. It came out with various options to lock up between about 130,000 hectares and up to about 600,000 hectares. The Environment Department wanted to lock up the larger amount. The departments were all on different wavelengths in relation to the outcome.

Another issue that is important is the loss of rates income to councils. We have already seen councils lose out on funding from national parks. Out of all of that we ended up with an increase in road maintenance that usually comes back on councils. There is certainly a loss of income there that needs to be worked through. The most important thing is the lack of consultation with local government, which has a great resource and knowledge base. The annual conference unanimously rejected what the Government has done. It has locked them out of the negotiations. Those people do have the ability to communicate with their own areas and it is disappointing that the Government decided not to include them in those talks, particularly towards the end, when they would have been able to give the Government some valuable advice and community support for an outcome that was suitable to the whole region.

I refer to the other RFAs, particularly in the western area—the cypress region. We do not want to have the same problems out there. I guarantee that there will be a third world war if the Government even tries to do the same type of a snow job out in those regions.

Mr Littleproud: Trevor Perrett and I funded that study, so we have scientific proof that we were right.

Mr HOBBS: Absolutely. A lot of work has been done in that cypress region. I think that can help short-circuit some of the long-term impacts in the cypress area.

Mr Palaszczuk: You could not deliver long-term security. We did.

Mr HOBBS: That is untrue. We were working through that. This Government only happened to come along. We did all the hard work; this Government did nothing. All it did was happen to fall into Government after we had done all the work with native title, the Trade Practices Act and so on. In fact, it was this Minister's department and the Government that tried to put up the rate that those millers would have to pay for their licences. This Government did that and we caught it out. We raised that matter in the House and then the Government back-pedalled and said that it would not do that. This Government got caught.

Mr Palaszczuk: You go and try to say that in your area.

Mr HOBBS: I have. Private land-holders in the region are going to be sold out also. The proposed vegetation management legislation will have some serious impact on the harvesting of timber on freehold land. We suspect that this Government will try to reach a compensation deal with a few of them, and that may take up most of the money it is going to try to get from the Federal Government and elsewhere.

At the end of the day, there are plenty of people out there on private land who have shown that they can in fact harvest much better resources from their land than the Government can from its land. I have forgotten the figures, but we saw one fellow who in his small area of around 2,000 acres was harvesting virtually as much as the whole region, but he was doing it on a sustainable basis. He would go out and make sure that the timber he had left had enough room to grow. He used to manage it. We may be able to get huge increases in volume from our own land as well.

All the matters I mentioned here were raised and carried unanimously by the 16 local authorities we met with the other day. It is a good example of where the Government has got it absolutely wrong. These councils are expressing the concerns of their constituency and are prepared to protest. They reckon they were sold down the river. It is as simple as that.

Mr Cooper: Sold a pup.

Mr HOBBS: Absolutely.

Mr Cooper: It is coming unstuck.

Mr HOBBS: It is all coming unstuck now.

Time expired.
