



Speech by

JEFF SEENEY

MEMBER FOR CALLIDE

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FORESTRY AMENDMENT BILL

Mr SEENEY (Callide—NPA) (12.36 a.m.): I rise to participate in the consideration of this legislation which, as the Minister said, is the first step in implementing the Government's so-called plan for south-east Queensland's forestry industry. In his second-reading speech, the Minister claimed that the agreement was the outcome of two years of analysis and negotiation to determine the future of the forest and timber industry in south-east Queensland. That statement at best is grossly misleading.

This legislation is based on an agreement that was signed by four groups: the Australian Rainforest Conservation Society, the Queensland Conservation Council, the Wilderness Society and the Queensland Timber Board. That was consultation with three conservation groups and one representative of the Queensland Timber Board—hardly a group inclusive of all stakeholders. There was nobody from local government, nobody from the grazing industry, nobody from the recreation industry and nobody representing all those other stakeholders who have a legitimate stake in the future use of south-east Queensland's forests.

This legislation bears no relation and very little relevance to the scientific analysis that has gone on over a long period of time to establish a sustainable yield of commercial timber from south-east Queensland's forestry reserves. That was part of the regional forestry assessment process agreed to with the Commonwealth Government. I said at the time when this agreement was signed with much fanfare and backslapping—and I take this opportunity to repeat it again—that I believe that the agreement that was signed was a political con job. It was all about smoke and mirrors. It was sold by a battalion of clever public relations people as a regional forestry agreement, yet it bore very little relevance to the regional forestry agreement process as was originally entered into by the State and Federal Governments.

The Queensland Government plan that the Minister referred to so extensively in his second-reading speech is really the continuation of an agenda that is being driven by the Left Wing of the Labor Party and its cohorts in the conservation movement. It is an agenda to achieve one aim: a strategy to achieve the complete end of logging in native forests and the destruction of the native forest industry in south-east Queensland as we know it. There is no scientific reason why that logging should end and there is no scientific reason why that industry, which has to date been sustainable, should be destroyed. There is no scientific reason identified in all the studies that were conducted as part of the RFA process that even begins to justify a complete end to logging in native forests—none at all! That is the key issue that has to be considered as part of this whole forestry debate. There is no scientific reason why sustainable logging cannot continue in our State forests, and that is the point that makes a mockery of the much trumpeted agreement on which this legislation is based.

This particular legislation provides for 25-year supply agreements to mills that are currently operating. For many of those mill operators, it will be welcomed. As such, it will receive some support. However, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that it is based entirely on a false premise. This legislation is not based on science, which was supposed to be the basis of the regional forestry agreement. Let us not forget that the regional forestry agreement set out to establish what the sustainable yield was from south-east Queensland's forestry reserves. It set out to establish for all time, to put beyond doubt, what the sustainable yield of sawlogs was.

Out of that whole process, a process that reportedly cost \$11m, we never got the proposed regional forestry agreement which was its very purpose. Instead, we have a shallow agreement signed by three conservation groups and a representative of the Queensland Timber Board that has determined that logging will end completely in all State forests after 25 years—not for any scientific reason but to satisfy an agenda, to satisfy a philosophy, that has been driven to the exclusion of all scientific evidence by the Left Wing of the Labor Party. It is an agenda that is being supported and promoted by the so-called conservation movement to bring about what for them has been a long-term strategy. It is an erroneous strategy that is based on a complete misunderstanding of what logging does to native forests. It is a strategy that is based on the assumption that logging somehow destroys forest areas forever and those areas are somehow removed from the forestry reserve once they are logged. We have seen that stupid emotive notion supported in interjections in the House tonight.

Shutting down the native forest timber industry is like shutting down a productive factory. It is like shutting down a factory that can go on producing forever. Our native forestry reserves can be a non-polluting, regenerating factory that will be still producing quality timber products for many generations to come if it is correctly managed. Indeed, that is the very reason they were designated as forestry reserves in the first place. That is their very reason for existing. They were set aside to produce timber forever on a sustainable yield basis.

Selective logging does not destroy forests. Selective logging allows forests to regenerate. Queensland forests have never been clear felled. Queensland forests have never been destroyed by logging, and no-one has ever suggested that they should be. Generations of practical forestry management, backed up by scientific study, would indicate that the forests of south-east Queensland can be selectively logged on a rotational basis that would vary between 10 and 20 years, depending on the species involved. That means that every 10 or 20 years the commercial sized logs can be removed from those forests to produce quality timber products. The trees that are left will continue to grow to maturity and in their turn produce quality timber. That does not mean that a tree will grow from a seedling to a mature tree in that 10-year to 20-year cycle. It means that by removing the commercial sized logs it gives an opportunity for younger immature trees to grow to maturity, and that is an opportunity that they would not have in an unlogged forest simply because of the dominance of the mature trees.

Once that concept is understood, once that reality is accepted, it is not hard then to understand how hardwood forests can continue to produce quality sawlogs in perpetuity, as they have done successfully for the past 100 years. The only question is at what level they can be logged. What is the sustainable level of sawlogs that can be produced from a particular forest region? That is what the regional forestry agreement set out to determine. That is what the \$11m was spent for. The regional forestry agreement process was well on the way to establishing that sustainable yield by scientific analysis. Then it was derailed and disrupted by the election of this State Labor Government and the whole process was hijacked by the extreme conservation movements, who make no attempt and no effort to understand the timber industry. They are driven by a short-sighted, philosophical commitment to the complete ending of native forest logging and the complete destruction of the native timber industry as such.

Instead of a regional forestry agreement that has integrity, one that is based on science, one that guarantees the future of the Queensland hardwood timber industry and also ensures that adequate areas will be reserved, we have a political deal that achieves none of the original aims of the RFA process, but seeks to appease the extremists in both the Left Wing of the Labor Party and the conservation movement. It is a deal that is impossible to deliver in reality. It is widely accepted in the timber industry by many practical timber managers that it will be impossible to deliver 25 years of continued supply of quality sawlogs from the areas that are left outside the reserve system.

There is absolutely no detail from the Government or the promoters of this legislation where that timber is to come from. We should never forget that the agreement calls for nearly a million acres, 400,000 hectares, to be locked up now and excluded from logging. The remaining State forest reserve has to, under the terms of this legislation, provide sufficient timber to give the existing mills security of supply for the next 25 years. That is increasingly being seen as totally and completely impossible by the forestry people in the field.

Already moves are being made to harvest more intensively in those areas that are still available to the forest industry. Already timber cutters are being told to cut more immature trees down to what the industry knows as a GBH of 40 centimetres, which is a tree of very small diameter, a diameter of 40 centimetres at breast height. That is undesirable from a timber production point of view, but it is a response to this much trumpeted agreement. It is an attempt to produce as much timber as possible from the remaining areas that are left outside the reserve system.

In an attempt to achieve the objectives of this legislation, it is becoming increasingly likely that mills are going to be asked to cut more and more a greater proportion of immature trees and a greater proportion of poor quality timber. This will have quite an obvious impact on the viability of their

operations and lead to what I believe is the classic escape clause that the Government has built into this legislation. The legislation adds clause 4 to section 46 of the existing Act to allow for sales permits for the getting of forest products or quarry material. It allows those permits to be granted for a period of not more than 25 years. However, the sting is in the tail. Clause 4(c) requires the permittee, the person who is granted the permit, to give the State the first right of refusal to an assignment or to the transfer of the permit. This is the Government's escape, and is the only way the Government has any chance of even partially achieving the aims of this legislation.

Some mills will get 25 years' supply as the Government exercises that first right of refusal and buys out the mills that find the going too tough. It is not hard at all to envisage the situation where a particular mill is given access to an inferior standard of timber and asked to process not only young and immature logs but also an increased number of logs of poor quality that would not normally be processed. In so doing, they will find themselves in an unviable situation because of the economics of processing such timber. The conditions that are attached to their permit then mean that the State has the first right of refusal of the assignment that is included with that permit. The Government will then obviously purchase those mills and make the timber available to other mills to try to help them meet their 25-year guarantees.

It is important to realise that the Government, according to the Minister's second-reading speech, would purchase not only the timber allocation but the business as well. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that this escape clause in this legislation is in effect a backdoor means to shut down some of the mills that rely on the hardwood native timber in south-east Queensland's State forests, and to shut them down sooner rather than later. The only way 25 years' supply of sawlogs can be delivered to any of the existing mills under this legislation is for some of those existing mills to be closed. The mechanism to do that is the escape clause which has been built into this legislation.

To have any chance of operating in the long term, the current mill operations have to continue to operate economically until timber becomes available from the proposed plantations. The time frame for that has been set at 25 years to match the time frame for the permits. That, too, is widely considered within the industry as being an impossible target to meet. There are no successfully growing hardwood plantations in Queensland of any size or maturity—none. There is no scientific basis upon which the prediction of a 25-year production cycle for a hardwood plantation is being made. There are any number of things that can go wrong between the planting of a hardwood plantation for the first time and its subsequent harvest, given that the technologies involved are unproven in the south-east Queensland environment. They are totally unproven and untried in this environment.

There is an almost total and unanimous belief within the timber industry that the 25-year target will prove impossible to reach, even under the most optimum growing conditions. For the mills involved, it will be a hard slog trying to continue to operate economically while being given access to poor quality and immature timber while they wait for the timber supply to become available from plantations that have not yet been planted. The land for these plantations has not even been identified yet. There is no scientific proof that they can even be grown successfully in this environment. All the while, the Government has its escape clause ready and available, an escape clause which requires the permittee to give the State the right of refusal to an assignment or transfer of that permit should the mill wish to sell it for any reason or should they find that their operation has become unviable because of the limited or poor quality timber they are being given access to or because of the transport distances that are involved or because of any number of other reasons the Government may impose upon them.

There is a woeful lack of detail in this legislation about what the timber assignment that each particular mill will have access to will entail. There is a woeful lack of detail from the Government about the whole forestry agreement. There is no detail about which areas are going to be assigned to which mills. There is nothing to suggest that there will be enough timber to provide the supply agreements that this legislation provides for, given the unnecessary lock-up of 430,000 additional hectares. There is no detail about minimum quality standards or minimum size standards that will be included in those permits and there is no detail about how the 25-year supply guarantees that are promised by this legislation will be met.

Meanwhile, there are large areas of valuable timber that could quite readily be harvested on a sustainable basis that are being locked up for purely philosophical reasons. It is a philosophy that is quite simply wrong to anyone who understands the bush and anyone who understands the business of forestry. It is senseless to lock up such a resource. It is senseless to lock up vast areas of south-east Queensland's forests when commonsense, logic, experience and science would suggest that they can be successfully regenerated and can successfully supply quality sawlogs in perpetuity.

An actively growing forest—a constantly regenerating forest—is much more likely to fulfil the role of the lungs of the earth that the conservation movement quite rightly suggests is an important role for our State forestry reserves. South-east Queensland forests can fulfil that role and they can also produce a constant ongoing supply of high-quality sawlogs, which was their original purpose. Our forests can fulfil both roles if they are managed according to science rather than to meet narrow

philosophical agendas. The potential for this win/win solution has been totally lost in the Queensland Government plan which is the basis for this Forestry Amendment Bill before the House tonight.

This legislation must be seen for what it is. It must be seen to be the result of an agenda which seeks to completely destroy at any cost the hardwood native forestry industry in south-east Queensland—not only in the forestry reserves but also ultimately on private land. It has been mooted that in the future more legislation will be introduced into this House which will seek to restrict a landowner's right to manage vegetation of all types on his freehold and leasehold land.

I call upon the State Government today to completely exempt commercial timber from any such controls. Commercial timber of all types, whether it is planted in farm forestry plots or in native stands, should be exempt from future legislation to restrict land clearing. Its management is very distinct and very different from the management of vegetation for pastoral or farming activities. At least if that timber is exempt from those controls then the hard-pressed timber mills will have one secure source of supply.

Commercial timber should be available for the land-holder to sell at his own discretion. It should be completely exempt from any controls that are placed on freehold land by any future legislation that is introduced by this Government. Land-holders need that assurance. They need to know that they can continue the responsible timber management practices that they have engaged in for generations. They need to know that they can continue to harvest this timber—a resource which is part of the land that they own. Timber mills need to know that they have access to that resource. Land-holders need to know that they can continue to manage that resource and to harvest that timber in a sustainable, responsible way. Unless they get that assurance, they can hardly be blamed for the rapid harvesting of timber to get a maximum return in the shortest possible time before some future legislation is introduced and their right to harvest their timber is taken away forever.

This legislation is being promoted as giving security to the current timber industry. I do not believe it can achieve that goal for all of the currently operating mills. I do not believe it provides the industry with any security at all. The mills will be pitted against each other in a survival of the fittest contest over the very limited remaining resource, with the Government using the built-in escape clause to rationalise the number of mills over a very short time frame.

If this Government wants to provide the timber industry with the security that it needs, it should revisit the agreement upon which the legislation is based. It should accept that the commercial harvest of sawlogs from our State forest reserves can continue in perpetuity, so long as that harvest is conducted at a scientifically sustainable rate. The Government should acknowledge that the commercial production of timber from freehold land is a sustainable and responsible practice that land-holders have been engaging in for generations and it should guarantee the right of those land-holders to continue the responsible and sustainable management of their timber on their land.

This legislation is seen by some in the timber industry as offering more security than they had in the past. That is probably so for a proportion of operators, given that they were starting from a very low base. It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the degree of security it offers is questionable indeed. If the proposition it contains is examined in detail in the full context of the agreement signed, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that it will be impossible for the aims of this legislation to be delivered. It is undoubtedly based on a completely false premise. It is based on an agenda to completely end native forest logging, both in State forest reserves and, I believe eventually, on private land. That agenda must be seen for the nonsense that it is. That agenda must be subject to scientific scrutiny and exposed as the fraud that it is. That agenda must be abandoned, and the timber industry in south-east Queensland must be guaranteed a future. This legislation certainly does not guarantee that future.

Time expired.
