



Speech by

**JEFF SEENEY**

**MEMBER FOR CALLIDE**

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Hansard 10 December 1999

### **VEGETATION MANAGEMENT BILL**

**Mr SEENEY** (Callide—NPA) (3.09 p.m.): I rise to join in the debate on the Vegetation Management Bill, sick at heart and with a deeply felt anger at the travesty of democracy that is happening here this afternoon. We are considering a piece of legislation that has far-reaching effects. It was introduced into this Parliament yesterday and will be guillotined in a little over an hour's time. It will be guillotined despite a long list of speakers, whose electorates will be directly affected, still expressing a desire to have some input into the debate. It will be guillotined without any consideration of the clauses of the legislation which contain the detail that is so important to its implementation. It will be guillotined without consideration of two pages of amendments that have just been introduced into this House by the Minister.

In his second-reading speech, the Minister said that this was an historic day for Queensland. He was right about that—and he is right about little else. With the introduction of this legislation, the Queensland Parliament sees the culmination of the worst example of political bastardry in many a long day. This is the worst piece of cynical political manipulation I have ever seen. It is sickening in its dishonesty, and it is sickening in its deceit. It is a continuation of the agenda of the loopy Left—another ideologically driven feel-good issue that is being pursued at the expense of the real issues which affect so many people's lives—and this time pursued at the expense of the people of rural Queensland.

Today sees the culmination of a strategy that was designed to deliver an ideological goal to a noisy minority in return for preference support in key urban seats. Today sees the culmination of that strategy, which was dishonest at the start and is dishonest at the end. The strategy which has led to the introduction of this legislation has had dishonesty and deceit at its core. It has been driven by a dishonest and deceitful Minister who has grossly misused the resources of his office to divide Queenslanders and to set them against each other in the cynical pursuit of this nonsensical ideological agenda.

This dishonest and deceitful strategy has produced dishonest and deceitful legislation. The strategy of dividing Queenslanders by demonising and vilifying land-holders and primary producers has created, and will create, divisions in our society that will persist for generations to come. It will deepen and broaden the gulf that regrettably exists between the urban areas—who are remote from the realities of nature and remote from the realities of natural resource management—and the people of rural Queensland who know and understand those realities all too well.

It is a strategy that has been made successful by the laziness of the urban media. They have been all too eager to promote almost any sensational, emotive rubbish fed to them by the proponents of this agenda, rather than make the effort to understand the complexity of the issue and look beyond the cheap shot. Rather than display any professionalism or objectivity, the urban media has been only too willing to play a compliant role in demonising and vilifying land-holders with stories about burning farms and wholesale destruction of the bush. They have allowed a strategy to be engineered to set rural land-holders up as scapegoats, completely ignoring and belittling the knowledge and the skills that those people have built up over generations of land management.

The land-holders of rural Queensland are not environmental vandals. We do not destroy the land that sustains us. We do not destroy the land that sustained our grandfathers and we do not destroy that same land that will sustain our grandchildren. We have developed and nurtured that land

for generations. We have boosted its productivity to ensure our economic survival and we have contributed immeasurably to the wellbeing of the State and the nation. However, on the whole, we understand the land and the issues involved in its management infinitely better than anyone possibly could from the security of an urban existence.

There can be no doubt that, to people who have no understanding of the land and no experience of land management or land development, some land management operations can cause concern, especially when they are seen in the context of an emotive presentation in a 30-second TV clip on the evening news. Whether it is land development or forestry, the time scales of responsible management are much longer than the attention spans of remote TV viewers or sensation-seeking journalists. Those of us who live with the land know that the time scales of responsible management extend over generations.

We are proud of the professionalism and the ingenuity of the operators who constitute our primary industries, and it is about time that they were given the recognition and the credit they deserve. It is about time that the whole business of farming and the professionals who engage in it as a career were awarded a much higher level of esteem in the general community. It is about time that the know-it-all urban media cast aside the old stereotypes and took a fresh look at primary industries and the way that the urban media seeks to portray farmers generally.

Of late, it seems that everyone is an expert on the core issues that affect our primary industries. Everyone is an expert on resource management this week, just as everyone is an expert on so many other issues. It seems that everyone is claiming that expertise from a safe distance. It is easy to be an expert and to develop fine-sounding ideologies from the comfort of urban isolation. These cute ideologies and oversimplistic solutions do not last long in the harsh economic and climatic reality of the real world of rural Queensland.

The Premier has demonstrated his contempt for the people of rural Queensland by making his stupid judgments from the window of a Government jet 40,000 feet above the ground, from where he thought he could tell the difference between seasonal grassfires and land-clearing activities; not only that, but he thought he could tell the difference between freehold land and leasehold land from the same vantage point. The Premier's absurd contribution to the debate, with his nose pressed up against the window of the high-flying jet, is typical of the Government's whole arrogant approach to this issue.

Instead of a meaningful involvement in a scientifically based process which is balanced and objective, rural land-holders have been subjected to a continual flow of ideological rubbish that has no practical focus. Such an approach serves only to cause alarm in rural Queensland and, tragically, in too many cases, brings about the opposite result to that which all responsible stakeholders have been trying to achieve for many years. It is time to recognise the great wealth of expertise and experience in resource management both within the rural community and within the Department of Natural Resources. There needs to be a combination of that practical expertise and experience with some scientifically based contributions to produce some scientific results—results which are acceptable.

This Government has refused to seek or accept the advice of its own departments. Advice from the departmental people who have the expertise has been ignored. If a conclusion from a departmental study is different from the inane ideologies of the socialist Left, it is totally ignored. If it does not fit the preconceived agenda, it is discarded. It is discarded, totally ignored and belittled, in the same way as the Premier belittled the Department of Primary Industries in this House today during question time. The Premier described the department as a political unit producing reports that are, in his words, rubbish—this from a man who sets himself up as an expert on resource management with his nose pressed up against the window of the Government jet travelling at 400 mph, 40,000 feet above rural Queensland. It really is absurd.

The report of the Department of Primary Industries was shredded because it did not agree with, and support, the preconceived position of the Premier and the Minister for Natural Resources. The Minister for Primary Industries did not even know about it. There can be no greater indication of the arrogance and falseness of this Government's approach to this issue than that—shredding the report from the Department of Primary Industries while claiming to know better on the basis of a quick flight over Queensland at 40,000 feet.

There needs to be extensive discussion and debate, but that is not going to happen today. Debate in this Parliament is to be gagged and this legislation is to be rammed through into law in a contemptuous disregard for the people of rural Queensland. There needs to be meaningful consultation, and that has not happened to date. We have seen the same old charade that we are becoming accustomed to in regard to consultation on a range of issues that affect rural Queensland. It is a charade that involves a meeting of stakeholders who are told what is going to happen. There is a lot of discussion and lot of lectures, but no real consultation, no real input from the people who have the real expertise and no real input from the people who understand the time frames and the issues involved in land management.

There has been no input from the people who have to live with the result of the legislation. What a cynical exercise it was to continue on with that farce of a negotiation process at the same time as television advertisements were being prepared to run in the urban media. We saw full-page newspaper advertisements promoting a decision that had already been made. The Courier-Mail had already been briefed. The stories were already written. It was more important to promote the decision in the urban media. The advertisements were ready to run in the Brisbane media long before the legislation was brought into this House and long before the so-called consultation process ended.

In reality, the decisions were made in the office of the Minister for Natural Resources in conjunction with the extreme Greens months ago. It was a case of, "What can we get away with? How can we manipulate public opinion to accept our agenda?" It is an agenda that will never be satisfied. There will be something else next week and next month. For the trendy Greenies, this will be an issue that will be just a pleasant memory by next week—something to fondly recall as they chat over their cappuccinos in the pavement cafes.

We who live and work in rural Queensland will not forget or forgive the political bastardry that has been the forerunner of the introduction of this legislation. The resentment and the anger at the way in which this issue has been portrayed by the anti-everything brigade and the compliant urban media will be felt for many years to come. For rural Queensland, this is a major watershed, a major turning point in our development and a major change in the way in which the resource base of our primary industries is managed.

In the face of that relentless propaganda campaign, it is important to place on record that the rural land-holders of Queensland have been and are responsible land managers. For many years, they have managed their land responsibly. To their everlasting credit, they have recognised and embraced the concepts of sustainability and they have instigated and embraced self-help groups such as Landcare and integrated catchment management. There are many emerging success stories from their efforts. In the main, they have recognised the mistakes that have been made in the past. I certainly acknowledge that there have been a relatively small number of mistakes that have been made in the past. However, over the past 10 to 15 years, there has been a huge attitudinal change as those mistakes have been recognised and the concepts of sustainability have been embraced. All of that work and all of that effort has been ignored and belittled.

No-one could blame rural land-holders for being angry and confused today. I have spoken to many already who have seen their capital values fall. They have seen land sales fall through. A huge pall of uncertainty has been hung over their lives and their futures. A huge amount of uncertainty has been injected into the management of their businesses. There are many concerns about the practicality of this process and how it is to work, and there is very little detail and information provided with the legislation.

Basically, this Parliament is signing a blank cheque. Basically, this Parliament is giving an open go to the Minister for Natural Resources. A whole range of issues are going to be open to interpretation. A whole range of issues are seemingly going to be subjective judgments made within the Minister's office or within the Minister's department. This whole process is being sold as simply extending leasehold restrictions to freehold land. That is only one of the complete falsehoods that is being perpetrated by the cynical proponents of this narrow-minded agenda. This legislation extends restrictions on land development far, far beyond the standards set in the current leasehold guidelines.

In the short time that we have had to study this Bill, it has become obvious that the devil is in the detail. As is usually the case, the facade that is sold to the urban media in its all-too-short attention span is constructed so as to seem as non-threatening as possible. The facade is made to seem reasonable when, in fact, the detail is disastrous in practical terms out there on the ground.

Until we know the details, which in a continuation of the cynical approach adopted by this Government will not even come before this House for scrutiny or debate—the details will not even be brought before this House—it is difficult to quantify the scale of this disaster upon rural Queensland. Apparently, the proposal is for a 30% retention of pre-1788 vegetation. I suggest that that proposal is broad enough to fit almost anything. Just about anything can be fitted within that guideline, and it will mean that just about anything can be made exempt from development. The premise itself is absurd and demonstrates a shallow understanding of the bush. How on earth is the pre-1788 situation to be determined?

Many areas have more timber now than they had in 1788. In some areas, the thickening of timber is well documented and well understood in rural Queensland. It relates to the lessening of the use of fire. It is well understood, yet it is ignored completely by the proponents of this legislation, because it does not suit their purposes. The thickening of timber is also well understood by officers of the Department of Primary Industries, but it is still ignored by the Minister and the other proponents of this legislation. As happened with the DPI report, if it is not what is needed to justify a preconceived position, the evidence is ignored.

The problem with detail and definition gets worse with classifications of things such as "at risk" and "of concern" vegetation areas. In effect, that can easily be stretched to be a complete moratorium on clearing for some time to come. Alarming, it is becoming increasingly obvious that in many areas of the State, this legislation is going to represent a complete ban on any further development in the future. In many other areas, it is going to tie up the process in red tape for months and months. Many of the terms used in this legislation are open to interpretation, and just how draconian these impositions will be on land-holders in the field depends on the definition of those terms. Definitions of such things as "regrowth", "regional ecosystems" and "areas of concern" can be interpreted either reasonably or unreasonably, depending on the agenda of the people administering the process.

That is where the record of the Minister for Natural Resources becomes all important. This process is to be administered by a Minister who is completely out of touch with the realities of his portfolio. Minister Welford needs to understand that, to date, his smart Alec ideologically driven approach has achieved nothing and will achieve nothing in the future. His handling of all areas of his portfolio has been terrible and his handling of the vegetation management issues has been worse than abysmal. That, too, is part of the background against which this Bill must be seen.

There has never been a Minister so distrusted in rural Queensland as the current Minister for Natural Resources. No-one in rural Queensland can have any confidence that we are going to see an objective and reasonable implementation of this legislation. To date, we have not seen anything objective and reasonable from Minister Welford, and we can hardly expect that to change now.

The issue of compensation has not even been considered half properly. I do not believe that the level of compensation that the Government is talking about will even come close to what is required to properly compensate rural land-holders for the losses that they will suffer. I believe that the DPI has also advised the Minister and the Premier of that. The amount of compensation will need to be many times greater than the figures that are being bandied around, because the losses will be felt by land-holders in a whole range of areas. They will lose capital value; in terms of available farmland for cultivation and grazing, they will lose earning potential; they will lose income from timber sales; and they will lose the saleability of their property. They will lose their much valued independence, for which they can never be compensated. Contractors will lose their businesses. All of those people deserve compensation for each and every loss. Those of us who know the land know that the \$100m talked about in this place is a gross underestimation. Again, it is interesting to note that the State Government has not included one cent in its Budget for compensation.

I believe that compensation is a false hope. Experience tells us that the compensation received from Government will always be hard to get and less than fair. People need to be left alone so that they can get on with their lives and manage their assets in a sustainable way, as they have been doing for generations. No compensation can be enough if the process is run by bureaucrats—little tin gods who tie up the process in red tape for years to come. Once again, we need only look at the record of the Minister and his department to judge the increasing likelihood of that happening. The point is that it is all so unnecessary. It is all based on dishonesty and deceit. It is all based on an ideologically driven agenda that has no practical focus. It is a tragedy to so divide Queenslanders against each other.

It seems that the socialist Left has won the propaganda battle in the urban media and it seems that this open-ended legislation will be forced through this House today without adequate debate. This House can be assured that this arrogance and this assault on property rights will never be forgotten. I support and I will forever defend the right of freehold land-holders to manage the land as they choose. I strongly support industry codes of practice developed by industry people. I understand and I value the difference between freehold and leasehold land, and I will do all I can to protect the value and rights of freehold landowners. I feel and I share the anger of rural people today. I am saddened and distressed by the corruption of the political process that is driving this legislation through this House with undue haste, which is being justified by the demonising of respectable, hardworking people. The land-holders of rural Queensland are not environmental vandals. We do not destroy the land that sustains us, we do not destroy the land that sustained our grandfathers, and we do not destroy the land—the same land—that will sustain our grandchildren.

I will oppose this legislation today and I will oppose it at every possible opportunity. I will oppose the cynical manipulation and the propaganda campaigns, and I hope most sincerely never to see the likes of it again in Queensland politics. I oppose the activities of the little tin gods and the bureaucrats who will inevitably administer this deceitful and dishonest legislation. I will continue to oppose, with everything at my disposal, the agenda of the Minister for Natural Resources, who has failed in his duty to rural Queensland.

Time expired.

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