



Speech by

Mr JIM PEARCE

MEMBER FOR FITZROY

Hansard 10 December 1999

VEGETATION MANAGEMENT BILL

Mr PEARCE (Fitzroy—ALP) (2.30 p.m.): It is a pleasure for me to join in this debate. As a member representing a rural electorate, I hope that I can put some balance into the argument that has been put to the Parliament today and paint the picture as I see it. I will respond to the honourable member for Keppel, Mr Lester. He said that landowners had a right to use freehold land the way they wish, because they have paid big money for the land. I have no problem with that argument. However, landowners in other States had those same expectations and carried out the management of their land in the same way as some of our landowners now do in Queensland. Those States are now facing massive land degradation, salinity and erosion. This Government is putting in place control measures before those disasters happen in this State. It is a commonsense approach. We do not need that sort of future for Queensland. This debate is not about fair and reasonable vegetation management; this debate is about the National Party not wanting landowners to be compensated for making commonsense decisions. Members of the National Party have travelled to Canberra to pressure Senator Hill not to provide the \$100m. They do not want a reasonable outcome. They have signed off on a deal. Now they do not want landowners to be compensated. Let's get fair dinkum about this!

Queensland's high tree-clearing rate, accounting for 80% of tree clearing in Australia, is largely due to the fact that the southern States have already cleared most of their land. Other States have imposed restrictions. They do not have the substantial cover of native vegetation that we still have in Queensland. They are suffering and will continue to suffer the consequences of constant, relentless clearing practices of the past. States such as Victoria and New South Wales are now paying the price through increased salinity and soil erosion. It is estimated that it will cost rural Australia more than \$1 billion a year in lost productivity. Why are we funding such programs as Landcare? The reason is that we have land care problems. Why are we funding and supporting the good work done by Landcare? Why is the Federal Government giving us hundreds of millions of dollars to solve environmental problems across the nation?

We are all aware of the Murray-Darling Basin and its problems with rising salt levels in soil and water nationwide. Yet in Queensland we want to stick our heads in the sand. In Queensland, it is estimated that up to 20,000 hectares of land have been identified as being salt affected. There are predictions of significant increases in salinity outbreaks that will have devastating impacts on primary production. Dr John Williams, a salinity expert with the CSIRO said—

"It distresses me when I see the consequences elsewhere in Australia, and Queensland is in the unique position of being able to do something".

The evidence is staring us in the face, and the National Party still opposes legislation that will go a long way to securing the long-term sustainability of our primary production lands. Not only do we have salinity and soil erosion problems arising from the removal of vegetation, the evidence exists that land clearing accelerates this process and, in turn, will lead to the extinction of half of Australia's bird life by 2050.

Professor Harry Recher of Perth's Edith Cowan University has identified impacts on fauna from vegetation clearing in the brigalow belt, which runs through central Queensland. Much of the Fitzroy electorate encompasses the brigalow belt. Although clearing has seen the development of highly productive lands, it has also meant the extinction of the paradise parrot, and other species are in

population decline. An endangered mammal, the northern hairy-nosed wombat is now isolated to a small colony near Clermont. Near Duaringa in my electorate, we have the bridled nailtail wallaby. Both these mammals have been reduced to single isolated and dangerously low populations. It is time for all of us in this place to realise the importance of maintaining land for future generations and realise that they are the ones with most to lose if their primary production lands become salt pans.

The fear of devaluation of properties through restrictions in the clearing of vegetation is minute compared with the realities of devaluation caused by salt invasion and severe erosion. Something had to be done to stop the indiscriminate clearing of land. The National Party in Government recognised the potential for a land degradation disaster and signed an agreement with the Federal Government in 1997. That agreement specifically required new controls on clearing. In Government they started the process; but in Opposition they have done an absolute turnaround and now oppose what they themselves had signed off on. It is a Labor Government that has had to do what the Nationals signed off on and which they now oppose.

As a Government, we are delivering on an election promise—as we have on many other promises. We are delivering what will be seen to be, when the Opposition stops muddying the waters, vegetation management legislation that will work, because it is fair and reasonable. The truth is that 70% of Queensland's land mass is still eligible for applications to clear. In supporting the legislation, I do have concerns about one issue that I would like the Minister to respond to, that is, the application and approval process. I would be very disappointed in the Minister and with the intent of this legislation if the application and approval process was to hamper the development of properties through unnecessarily long delays. I will be watching this issue closely and speaking up on behalf of producers if there are unnecessary delays. I also will be watching closely the way that departmental officers responsible for the approval process go about doing their job. Rural producers will respect the person who does the job well, but they will turn quickly on half-smart, university-trained, self-proclaimed experts who think the herbicide Zero is a Japanese fighter plane, making decisions that are not based on a realistic understanding of the land and the genuine needs of producers.

I would now like to address a number of issues raised in letters and faxes to my office from landowners across the State. Firstly, this legislation does not mean that there is a total ban on the clearing of vegetation. As I said earlier, 70% of Queensland is still eligible for approval to clear. The difference is that future broadacre clearing will be done with the intent of getting the balance right. The legislation is putting in place core protective measures. It does not ban the clearing of regrowth areas, unless there is on-site evidence that shows that to again clear the area of vegetation would put at risk the health of the soil, or cause the loss of ecosystems of significant importance to the area.

After making representations to the Minister, I am confident that landowners throughout the brigalow belt have nothing to fear. They can continue to clear regrowth areas every 10 to 15 years if it is important to maintaining production levels. The choice will be that of the landowner. There is no intent to end this necessary farm management practice. The only difference is that there will be guidelines—a framework—that landowners and Government will have to work through. The outcomes should be the approval of clearing with due consideration to the needs of the producer but with consideration given to the environment and the impact risk of the area.

From the correspondence sent to my office in recent days, several issues have come to notice. There is a high level of concern that the clearing of regrowth areas will be banned. This is, of course, not true. Members of the Opposition are peddling untruths. Landowners will be able to continue with the cycle of clearing regrowth areas as and when required. Restriction will apply only where an area of vegetation has been identified of significant importance to the preservation of flora and fauna, or where the land has the potential to be subjected to soil erosion or salinity. I have been briefed on this issue. I have asked questions in very strong terms. I stress: this restriction is expected to have little or nil impact on a landowner's ability to continue with sensible land management practices of the past.

There are fears that prescriptive tree-clearing guidelines will have widespread impacts on the livelihood of rural producers and their communities. There is no evidence to support those claims, but there is a real threat to the long-term viability of primary production land that will cause everlasting damage and destroy our rural producers and rural communities if we do not do something about the indiscriminate land clearing that is taking place. Personally, I would be more concerned about the impact of the GST on rural communities than about the impact of this legislation.

Mr Stewart of Oxford Downs near Nebo said in his letter that prescriptive guidelines—

"... could hamper primary producers' day-to-day management of their properties, including routine tasks such as clearing fence lines, cutting posts to repair fences and build new fences. We also use timber for building stockyards and gates within for cattle, sheep, horses and goats."

Again, this is wrong. Clause 84(1) is clear in its intent. There is no restriction on a landowner carrying on the normal maintenance and upgrading of the property and its boundaries. The new guidelines will not prevent logging on freehold land for timber production. Some people are concerned about that.

Mr Hobbs: If you put in a new fence, you can't get those posts from there.

Mr PEARCE: Yes, they can. There is nothing in the legislation that stops them from doing that. Those opposite are just peddling mistruths. They are scaremongering, trying to get themselves some credibility.

Mr Hayward: They don't want it to work.

Mr PEARCE: As the member for Kallangur said, those in the Opposition do not want it to work. It is as simple as that. We are trying to be fair and reasonable, but those in the Opposition do not want it to work.

Some of those who contacted me suggested that the State Government would be revoking leasehold permits. The Premier has made this point clear in a guarantee he gave in a press statement dated 8 December. It states—

"The State Government will honour all existing permits to clear on leasehold land."

That is fair. So it should. There is no problem if a leaseholder has been issued with a permit to clear. He still has permission to go ahead and do it.

The Winten Family of Angella Downs, Morven, wrote that they agree with the present guidelines but consider any further restrictions as too limiting. They have gone into debt to implement the property management plan on which a five-year tree clearing permit was granted. They have nothing to fear, as the permit has been issued and the Government will honour existing permits.

Mike and Sue Schmidt of Nardoo, Emerald, said that most people on the land realise that endangered plants and animals have to be protected, that a lot of work is being done and that, unfortunately, the few people who are not doing the right thing are the ones getting the press coverage. I agree with them. It is common knowledge that the activities of a few bring on laws that impact on the majority. That is something we have to live with.

After reading all the letters, I feel that those who wrote to me were motivated by the unknown—fear of what laws would be passed by the Parliament. I anticipate that many of those fears will be allayed as landowners become more informed.

In my view, primary producer reaction is being driven by the irresponsible behaviour of the Opposition, motivated not by commonsense in what is an important issue. This Opposition is more about creating confusion and panic. Those in the Opposition can squeal and say as much as they like, but what I have said is true. They hate it, and they hate it more when I stand in this place to speak on rural issues. I get right up their noses because they do not like to see a Labor member doing it.

I have a large rural electorate and I have a fair understanding of the issues that affect rural producers. I was raised on the land. Unlike National Party members who have no say because of their relationship with the Liberals and their fear of One Nation, I can keep an open mind on issues that impact on cattle and crop producers in my area.

Short-sighted claims by property experts that a potential slump in the value of undeveloped land in country New South Wales will be brought about because of planned tree-clearing guidelines lack vision. There may be very limited truth in these claims, but they fail to recognise what I believe is one of the most important things. They fail to recognise the potential for property devaluation brought about by declining yields from pastures and crops as land becomes useless as a result of loss of topsoil and encroaching salt. We have to look at the long-term viability of our primary producers.

The Opposition spokesman, the member for Warrego, attempts to sound forceful in accusing the Government of blaming all the State's environmental woes on farmers. Mr Hobbs should take a close look at what his party represents. He speaks for a few rich and powerful National Party members who exert their influence on the people who sit in this place. They have little regard for the fair dinkum, hardworking producers in my electorate. When it comes to representation by the National Party, rural producers fall into two categories—the rich and powerful, and the poor. Plenty of the people I talk to in my electorate are the ones who are out there struggling with drought, struggling to keep their families fed and clothed and sending their children to a small country school. They are working their butts off from daylight to dark. They are the people I am talking to. I do not talk to the rich and the powerful because they would not talk to me. Quite frankly, I do not want to talk to them. The National Party has abandoned its traditional support base. This is why One Nation got such a good result at the last election.

Having been raised on the land and representing a rural electorate, I admire the fact that most producers in my area are responsible. I know that they are angered by their fellow producers' insistence on clearing land. They suffer the consequences of poor land management practices through erosion and invasion of woody weeds.

I believe that this legislation is fair and reasonable. I believe that the Minister and all those people involved in the working parties have done an excellent job to come up with legislation which will work and which farmers will accept when they gain an understanding of it.

I wish those opposite would be fair dinkum in representing their electorates and get up and speak honestly about things instead of deliberately muddying the waters, causing confusion and panic, and having people on the land suffer. They are not able to sleep because they think the Labor Government is going to bring in legislation that will affect the way they live. We are not bringing in legislation that will be detrimental to their lifestyles. Things will be done a little differently.

If those opposite read the legislation, try to understand it, have an open mind, speak a bit of truth instead of untruths they are spreading and give the people on the land the opportunity to read the legislation, to accept the policy guidelines and to get an understanding of where we are going with this legislation, I bet they will see it as reasonable and fair legislation that is to the benefit of not only graziers or rural producers but also Queensland. Most importantly, it is to the benefit of future generations of this State and this country.
