



Speech by

Mr L. SPRINGBORG

MEMBER FOR WARWICK

Hansard 7 December 1999

TREE-CLEARING GUIDELINES

Mr SPRINGBORG (Warwick—NPA) (6 p.m.): I move—

"That this House calls on the Government to postpone plans to introduce mandatory tree clearing restrictions on freehold properties or a moratorium on clearing until the completion of independent economic and social impact assessment studies on the benefit of such restrictions for the environment and the impact of such restrictions on rural freehold property values; property productivity and viability; rural jobs; and rural communities;

and further that the Beattie Government stop making scurrilous and ill-informed judgments from the window of the Government jet at 40,000 feet."

Over the last few months we have seen a situation across this State in which the Beattie Labor Government has set out shamelessly to demonise rural communities, in particular farmers and graziers, by beating up and by overstating their level of land clearing in this State. It has done that in a number of ways.

The Government has deliberately misinterpreted much of the data that is currently available, including the data that is available with regard to the number of tree-clearing permits that have been granted in Queensland, which has nothing to do with the freehold tree-clearing issue. It has rolled that into figures which it is using as a beat-up. It alleges that there is significant panic clearing going on across Queensland. In many cases, nothing could be further from the truth. As I have said over the last couple of days, if something like this is actually happening, then the Premier and the Minister for Natural Resources need look no further than the mirror to see the cause.

When we were in Government, we were working with primary producers around this State to try to put in place some sort of reasonable regime to be able to come to an arrangement whereby we protected some of the most sensitive areas of vegetation on freehold land. And by and large, the rural communities in this State were comfortable with the approach that was adopted by the then Borbidge Government. We were going down the path of putting in place a voluntary process—a process whereby we took the rural communities with us, we took the farmers and the graziers of this State with us, and we ensured that we treated them with respect and acknowledged that what they had done over the last 15 or 20 years through the operation of Landcare had done much to protect some of the sensitive areas that were likely to fall victim to erosion in this State, as well as some of the higher sloping country, which may also have fallen victim to erosion due to land clearing. Many of those groups put in place their own voluntary guidelines, which were followed very well, and significant gains were made on a cooperative basis.

As soon as this Labor Government came to power in Queensland, it set about deliberately demonising rural producers. There is little doubt that, in many cases, those rural producers who have five or 10-year tree-clearing programs on their freehold properties have brought forward those programs. But generally, they have managed the trees on their properties in a very responsible way.

Surely, if we are going to justify some sort of legislation that this Government might bring into this Parliament tonight or tomorrow or the next day, or if we are to justify a moratorium on tree clearing in this Parliament, we must have some sound basis in fact to justify that and to vindicate the decision of Government. But we have nothing like that, other than a bit of hyperbole on the part of the Minister for

Natural Resources, who is using dodgy figures to justify his position. He is rolling together the freehold and leasehold figures and approvals for leasehold land, which is the majority of land clearing in this State and which is already regulated by his own department.

The only way to do this is on a scientific basis using the SLATS program—something which we resourced very well when we were in Government, thanks to the actions of the honourable member for Warrego, and which has suffered under this particular Government from budgetary cuts. We need a scientific basis for this. In the absence of that—if the Government is going to rush into this—then through this motion we are saying that we should have a moratorium on the introduction of tree-clearing guidelines.

This Government should be able to justify its statement that there will be a net benefit to the environment. This Government should be able to justify its position by showing that there will be no negative impact whatsoever on the viability of rural properties and no negative impact whatsoever on the valuation of those rural properties. Last week, a number of very senior valuers from the major rural property houses in this State put into print their particular concerns. I know that the Minister for Primary Industries—whilst he will be bound to vote a certain way on this motion—is very much aware of some of those concerns and is probably far more conciliatory and has a greater understanding of this particular issue. We must have an idea of the impact of this on rural properties, their valuations, their productivity and their viability levels, as well as the impact on rural jobs and rural communities, which are very much interlinked to any decision that is made by this Government.

Members need only cast their minds back a few years to when the Goss Government was in power and its negative and adverse impacts on services in rural communities. Tom Burns, who had some degree of credibility and respect in rural areas, brought in a system of rural impact—

Mr Littleproud: Not much, though.

Mr SPRINGBORG: No, not much. Nevertheless, he was probably one of the better blokes. He was a nice bloke. He put in place a system whereby there had to be a rural impact statement before these sorts of decisions were made. Where is that sort of process now? What we are seeing from this Government is a process of smoke and mirrors. I guarantee that for those farmers and graziers who have bought their properties on the understanding that they are able to responsibly self-manage their own timber, this will have an impact on their viability and their plans.

Some people have said to me, "We will compensate you for the value of that particular land, which you paid for, minus the capacity of being able to clear the trees, and you can shift some of your enterprise up the road." That is not a simple thing to do, because many people might not be geared up to do that. They might not be able to shift their tractors, trucks or whatever a long way. This is all about justifying the decision of the Government. It is saying, "Put on hold your plans until such time as you have been able to demonstrate that there is a positive, not net negative, influence of this."

What have we seen from the Premier over the past couple of days? He has made an absolutely scurrilous and outrageous attack on the integrity of people in rural areas—policy from 30,000 or 40,000 feet out of the porthole of a jet. The Premier is a modern-day Biggles, floating around Queensland with telescopic and X-ray vision; he can see right across the State, and can make some sort of unilateral decision or assessment that all this smoke across Queensland relates in some way to panic land clearing in all instances.

This morning in the House, members noted that the Minister for Emergency Services and the Minister for Primary Industries were somewhat less enthusiastic about that particular assessment than the Premier was himself. I think it is probably fair to say that he has been trying to dig himself out of a hole. He also said from his leather-bound seat 40,000 feet above the ground that he was able to tell the difference between lightning strikes and burning off, pasture rejuvenation and a whole range of other things. I have news for the Premier: nobody I know uses fire as a means of clearing virgin timber. It is inefficient. It does not work.

Mrs Edmond interjected.

Mr SPRINGBORG: How does one burn down a 100 year old gum tree? Has the member ever seen a 100 year old gum tree or a 500 year old gum tree? The only time that fire is an effective management tool is when dealing with saplings or seedlings. Otherwise, it is not an effective management tool. And if the Premier did see any fires relating to land clearing out there, they would have been burning stacks that have been there for the last six, eight, 10 or 12 months and which have dried out.

Also, the Premier cast the notion that this was some sort of Russian retreat from the Napoleonic advances; that we are going to slash and burn and pull back because we are worried about the invasion from the city and we are worried about what the Premier is going to do. Those people out there might have had some semblance of respect for this particular Government, but I can tell members that that has evaporated, considering what the Government has been doing and the way it has been demonising those people out there in the last few days. If the Premier is going to do these

sorts of things, he should at least have some base knowledge of the difference between pasture rejuvenation and fire management. I ask him to consider that even before Captain Cook came to Australia, the Aboriginals used fire as a way of creating new growth.

Time expired.
