



Speech by

**Mr L. SPRINGBORG**

**MEMBER FOR WARWICK**

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Hansard 10 December 1999

### **VEGETATION MANAGEMENT BILL**

**Mr SPRINGBORG** (Warwick—NPA) (Deputy Leader of the Opposition) (11.06 a.m.): In rising to participate in this debate and oppose this repugnant Vegetation Management Bill before the Parliament, I take the opportunity at the outset to commend the member for Crows Nest, the current shadow Minister for Primary Industries in this State. It will be the member for Crows Nest's last day in this Chamber as shadow Minister for Primary Industries. He has done an absolutely magnificent job on behalf of the primary producers in this State. I must admit that I have sat in this Parliament over the last few months and listened to the very comprehensive and knowledgeable way in which he has handled debates such as on the sugar industry, which was a very complex debate, the Forestry Act and, in recent times, the Primary Producers' Marketing and Organisation Act. He has done an excellent job with those. I say to the honourable member that he will be very fondly remembered for the contribution he has made to primary producers in this State.

Isn't it ironic that at 4.30 p.m. today we will come into this Parliament and say all sorts of nice things about each other, say Merry Christmas and head home? I can tell the House that, because of the actions of this Government and the Minister for Environment and Heritage and Minister for Natural Resources and this Premier—who is not in the Chamber at the moment, but he is completely out of touch—it is going to be a very, very unmerry and very unhappy Christmas for the primary producers of this State. The Government is effectively going to gut and destroy their enterprises. So when those opposite sit down to their Christmas turkey on Christmas Day, they should think of those people who will be contemplating their future next year under these new, oppressive tree-clearing guidelines to be brought in by this Government.

I have also been thinking of how long it has been since we have seen such a disgraceful and dishonest advertising campaign not only in this State or country but also throughout the world. It reminds me of those gerbil ads which took the target minority groups and betrayed them as rats running down drainpipes to pass the masses and to give them the wrong impression. That is what this is. This is no better than gerbil-like stuff. What the Government has done, started by the honourable member for Everton, is a deliberate distortion of the tree-clearing figures in this State. It has rolled together the leasehold clearing figures with the freehold clearing figures. It has ignored the amount of historical regrowth which has been cleared. The Government has also ignored the fact that, of much of the country of the State that is cleared, in actual fact 40% goes back to regrowth and is not touched again. So the net loss is nowhere near that which has been indicated by Government members in this place. They have set about dishonestly demonising primary producers in this State in a disgraceful campaign.

The Government has also contravened its own advertising standards or guidelines in regard to this. Its advertisements are supposed to be targeted at those people who are most affected. The primary producers of this State are most affected. So where did the advertisements go? In the Courier-Mail! They did not go in Country Life last week. They did not go in Country Life this week. They might go in next week. So it is a very, very dishonest campaign to demonise primary producers in the eyes of many people in the city areas who probably have a genuine—if not misguided—concern and understanding about the extent of tree clearing, what it actually means and what are proper farm management practices.

**Mr Lester:** A terrible stunt.

**Mr SPRINGBORG:** It is an absolutely dreadful political stunt. This Government will rue the day it did that. Farmers are not going to march in the streets, because they are reluctant to do that. A lot of people in rural and regional areas will quietly keep this in their kick, and they will express their anger at the next State election.

Do members know what has happened in the last couple of years in this State? People have given up on trying to lobby Governments because it is no use. We have had this disgraceful mock consultation, overseen by this Minister for the past 12 or 18 months, when he knew full well what he was going to do. On Tuesday night, he took in a proposal and dropped it in front of the interest groups at that meeting and said, "This is what you are going to get."

I must admit that I am typically amused and dismayed by the conservationists in this State. They had everything to gain and nothing to lose. The primary producers had everything to lose and nothing to gain, but the members of the Conservation Council are not happy. They would not be happy in heaven. That is the reality. They have put this Government on notice that this is only the start; that this is the first part of their ambit claim. When they have finished effectively destroying rural producers in this State, they will move on. The other morning on ABC radio, the convenor of the Queensland Conservation Council, Imogen Zethoven, said that some farm families will become non-viable as a consequence of this. We know that. We also know that that is a consequence of that secret report which the Department of Primary Industries has been working on.

This legislation is no better than what the New South Wales Environment Minister did in August 1995, when the Carr Government came to power in New South Wales—SEPP 46. This is no better, because as of the moment of proclamation, this effectively puts in place a 12-month moratorium. The provisions of the Integrated Planning Act, insofar as time frames for the assessment of development approvals are concerned, are going to be suspended. So those primary producers who want to do some sensible land clearing—and the great majority of them do— will lodge an application with an assessment manager on 1 January, but it may not be heard until 30 December. That is what this Government has done. There is absolutely no doubt about that whatsoever.

What will we see next? Will the next raft of legislation or regulation to come into this Parliament be similar to that of New South Wales, in that people will not be able to plough paddocks that have not been ploughed for 10 years or more? This Government is heading in exactly the same direction. That is fine, because for this Government it is out of sight, out of mind. But in months and years to come, as the negative implications of this come to pass and hardworking farm families are destroyed by this Government's own hands, it will not want to know about it, and it will dismiss legitimate concerns as nothing more than the residual gripes of whingeing farmers. I can see that all coming to pass now.

What about the disgraceful lack of transparency that we have seen in this Parliament, and the disgraceful lack of opportunity for members on this side of the Parliament—and even those members on the other side of the Parliament who are genuinely interested and concerned about this issue—to be able to look at this legislation and to properly consider it? The implications of this are just starting to emerge. It is very difficult to be able to properly respond to this legislation without having the assessment criteria, which was supposedly going to be made available today but may not now be made available until Tuesday or perhaps Wednesday of next week. Why did this Government not give this Parliament a decent opportunity to debate and consider this? That means allowing this Bill to sit on the table for a couple of weeks. Why has this Government hidden the assessment criteria, which will contain all the hooks and all the prickles? Over the Christmas break, we will see things emerge with regard to this particular legislation, the Government's proposal, and what it is going to do as a result of its unilateral decision and no consultation. It will sound the death knell for many farm families in this State. There is absolutely no doubt about that.

It is about time that the Government stopped being driven by extreme Greens who, as I said, would not be happy with the outcome, whatever it was. They have made it very clear that they are going to move on. What is the Government going to do next time? Will it say, "We have chopped one arm off. We will be very happy to take the other one off next"?

**Mr Hamill:** You've been watching Monty Python.

**Mr SPRINGBORG:** Those people are the sacrificial lambs. This might appease some people who are genuinely concerned—and I am not saying that they are not—but a lot of that concern has been generated by misinformation.

The Treasurer was interjecting, pretending to have some sort of knowledge and concern about people in rural areas. But he is the bloke who said that, after the GST comes in, farmers' wives are going to jump into cattle trucks and go into town to do the shopping or to go to church so that they can get a diesel fuel rebate. Great stuff, isn't it!

**Mr Cooper:** What a way to travel!

**Mr SPRINGBORG:** They get about eight kilometres to the litre. Isn't that great! They will have the cattle truck with the groceries in the back amongst the cattle. What an absolute lot of nonsense!

I turn now to some of the other issues that it is very reasonable to consider. The issue of salinity, which is very important, has been mentioned in this Parliament. A national salinity audit, which was conducted recently, pointed out that, in Queensland, there is a risk of a salinity problem in the next 100 years. It pointed out also that there is an area of emerging salinity near Dirranbandi. The majority of that was an historical salt lake. But that is fine; put it in a document, and that is treated as gospel by the Government and many other people.

The issue of salinity also must be considered in relation to the different environmental regions around this country. We have to consider soil types, vegetation cover and the historical level of the watertable. All of those sorts of things are very relevant. In places with very high-level, deep clay soils, the opportunity for the watertable to rise from 100 or 200 feet to a level close to the surface is probably negligible, if at all. But in the southern parts of New South Wales, the northern parts of Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia, they have very high, naturally occurring watertables and soils that are very, very porous, and the opportunity for those watertables to rise and be of concern is much greater in those areas.

In this case, we have a deliberate distortion of facts. We have a deliberate distortion of science to suit a particular goal, which is about introducing these horrific tree-clearing guidelines without consultation. Mention salinity, and a lot of people in Brisbane will be concerned, because they are being fed misinformation. Talk about erosion, and of course people will be concerned, and I cannot blame them for being concerned.

Trees are not the only things that stop erosion. When I was Minister for Natural Resources, I went to an area near Longreach where significant rehabilitation work has been undertaken in areas that were heavily treed. The reality is that some trees actually suppress the grasses, which are far more important than trees in ensuring that the soil does not blow away or wash away. In some areas, grasses are far more important than trees. So it does not necessarily follow that trees provide a buffer to erosion. Sometimes grasses are far better in providing a buffer to erosion.

**Mr Welford:** No, that's not true.

**Mr SPRINGBORG:** They are. I will tell the Minister about places around the State where that is the case. Look at creek banks and rivers and those sorts of things. Whilst tree roots might be very important in holding together the superstructure, grasses are very important in holding together the smaller bits of soil that might wash away in a flood. The superstructure is held together by tree roots, but grasses are very important. The Minister knows that, and to deny that is to deny reality.

**Mr Cooper:** Buffel grass can go down 15 feet.

**Mr SPRINGBORG:** Absolutely. There is a whole range of other plants that do those sorts of things.

We have also heard the misguided statement that this legislation will have no impact on existing leasehold permits—and nor should it. They were legitimately granted after an exhaustive process by primary producers, who put in an application for a permit and met the regional assessment guidelines under the regional framework established for leasehold. They have done that sort of thing. In many places there has been concurrence with the Department of Environment, which has identified any endangered species of trees, plants or animals. There has been a rejigging of what might have been the original clearing plan as a consequence of that. That was a ruse, and it was very dishonest to advance it.

Do honourable members realise the real implications of this legislation on leasehold properties? At the moment we have almost 30 sets of regional leasehold guidelines in this State. They were worked out on a consultative basis with primary producers, people involved in Landcare and people representing the environment movement. Those guidelines were good and practical. There is no doubt that the guidelines will have to be reviewed at some future time. The farming communities were included in the consultative process. The guidelines allowed for no clearing of endangered species and provided opportunities to be able to clear as-of-concern species in certain circumstances.

As soon as this legislation is proclaimed we will find that new applications will be made under the more restrictive freehold regime. I ask the Minister to respond to the situation in relation to leasehold applications in this State which have not been assessed as of the date of the proclamation of this legislation. Are those properties going to be assessed as per the regional leasehold clearing guidelines which existed prior to the date of proclamation, or are they going to be assessed under the new rules? That is a legitimate concern because those people put in their applications based on the guidelines as they applied at the time. Those guidelines allowed some clearing of as-of-concern species.

Another problem with this legislation is that the science involved in it is wrong and has been distorted. It is also hypocritical because it is contrary to Labor policy. We know that, on occasions, the

Minister for Natural Resources has told Queensland Country Life that freehold will be safe. This headline reads "Freehold rights 'safe'". That is another ruse on the part of this Minister. I table this document.

People in this State are genuinely concerned about being aware of these sorts of things. What Labor has said in its policy is very important and very pertinent to tree clearing in this State. Labor said that on election to Government it would—

"Examine the scope for a variety of incentives for land owners to enter into Voluntary Conservation Agreements and nature Covenants over their private land."

I have a whole range of articles which are relevant to the shallow and misleading promises of this Government. I table these articles for the information of the Parliament.

This Government knows full well that voluntary guidelines are workable. This Government knows full well that, in the framework which was put in place with the Commonwealth, there was an opportunity to pursue those sorts of things. I think there is a reasonable argument for the protection, with compensation, of endangered species. However, there needs to be a degree of flexibility when one is dealing with as-of-concern species and not-of-concern species. These matters can be dealt with under a voluntary framework in the same way that Landcare has worked in this State for a number of years. I have excellent areas in my electorate where, on a voluntary basis, we have been able to change some of the practices which have been of concern to people, namely clearing steep slopes and areas around rivers.

I want to refer to the issue of compensation. We have no principles of compensation; all we have is a figure of \$100m which has been plucked out of the air. This is likely to run into millions of dollars—at least half a billion dollars. It is all very well to say that one is going to compensate farmers for the value of the land that is lost. What about the expectation of being able to make a viable unit out of that property? One cannot say, "We will compensate you for a bit of the value of the country that may have been lost and which has been worked out by the Land Court, and then you can buy a property up the road." This sort of thing upsets the enterprise. We will have cattle trucks going backwards and forwards all the time. What consideration has been given to the loss of expectation? There are other aspects of farm management involved in this issue which are too numerous to mention.

We have the issue of clearing within 20 metres of gullies. Whilst I think it is sensible not to clear in a water course, the use of the word "gullies" is a very nebulous thing. There are certain areas in high country, and there are certain areas when one starts going further west, where, if one looks at a topographical map, almost the entire country can be defined as a gully. Water will flow. We are not talking about just overland flow; we are talking about water flowing in little depressions. It is important that the Government looks at that aspect in regard to tree retention.

It is immoral that the State policy in this regard is not disallowable. We have not as yet seen the State policy, but it is not disallowable. We also have regional vegetation management plans, and they are not going to be disallowable as well. What we have are these dreadful, horrific codes which will be presented to the primary producers of this State, and they will have no opportunity to deal with those matters.

I would like an explanation from the Honourable the Minister on the issue of routine management. The guideline states that one can clear for a fence line, but how wide can one clear? Can one clear a chain and a half wide? What is the extent of an existing fence line? Can one cut a tree off or can one clear half a chain wide, or a chain wide, on either side of the tree? What is the definition for clearing around cattle yards—just lopping something overhanging, or what? Those are the things on which we require information.

This legislation contains no capacity for regrowth trade-off. If one has an as-of-concern species or an endangered species remnant on one's property, and one has regrowth coming back which is not considered to be of high environmental consequence, it would be practical to allow the retention of certain regrowth as a trade-off in clearing some remnant vegetation. That is very important because it might allow a farmer to square-up his block of land.

What is the definition of "regrowth"? As far as I can ascertain, it means anything that is less than 70 per cent of the original height of the original standard timber. I would be interested to know what the situation is with regard to freehold land. I understand it also refers to less than 50% of the original canopy cover. This has some implications in regard to freehold clearing because some of those species of trees can grow up to that height, or in excess of that height, within 20 or 30 years—particularly when one is looking at belah and brigalow. That is a relevant issue for the Minister to look at. It has farm management implications.

I want to speak about the time allowed for approvals. The interim period is two years. Beyond that, it could be five years. That is not enough. If a farmer is going to do this, he should be able to put in—

Time expired.

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