



Speech by

Dr LESLEY CLARK

MEMBER FOR BARRON RIVER

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VEGETATION MANAGEMENT BILL

Dr CLARK (Barron River—ALP) (11.27 a.m.): Responsible land management underpins the economic and environmental sustainability of our State. The Vegetation Management Bill being debated in this Parliament today will provide an appropriate legislative framework to contribute to that goal.

I acknowledge that this legislation is generating genuine concerns, but it is also my great fear that this legislation is going to generate emotion and that many of the things that will be said here today by members opposite will turn out to be totally baseless or gross exaggerations.

I understand the need of members opposite to represent their constituents. I understand, I recognise and I acknowledge their expertise. I was listening particularly carefully to the speech made by the member for Warwick. I recognise his expertise. I recognise the contribution that he can make to this debate. It is for that reason that I call on him to show leadership in this current situation so that he can play a role in ensuring that the communities he represents, and rural Queenslanders generally, become involved in the implementation of this legislation and that they become involved in the preparation of the regional vegetation management plans so that they can input their expertise into those plans, because that is what is going to make the difference on the ground to the way in which this legislation is implemented.

The regional vegetation management plans will not be imposed on farmers; rather, they will involve extensive consultation in rural communities, drawing on the knowledge that people have of their local area. To me, that would be a mark of leadership in respect of this legislation. It is important that honourable members opposite do not stand in their places during the debate, haranguing us and making outrageous exaggerations such as those we heard from the member for Keppel.

The reason why I am saying that those opposite should demonstrate such leadership is because they know that we are going to be extending what has happened on leasehold land to freehold land. People who have had these experiences with their leasehold land have been able to demonstrate their ability to work within that framework. They have been able to demonstrate their ability to understand what sustainability means. I believe that we will see a similar situation when we turn to freehold land.

Indeed, as members would be aware, the Government is being criticised by the conservation movement because these guidelines do not go far enough to cover broadacre clearing that is contributing, without doubt, to greenhouse emissions. Members opposite would know that I have a great deal of sympathy for those views because, before I entered Parliament, I was president of the Wildlife Preservation Society, Cairns Branch, for some eight years. However, at the same time I recognise the enormity of the cultural change that this Bill requires. I think that that is what underpins a lot of the emotion that has been generated here today and will be generated in rural areas. As I come from far-north Queensland, I am very well aware of the ethic that we have in this State of, "This is my land and I will do with it exactly what I want". I know that that goes to the heart of this debate. However, if we are to examine all the evidence, I think that the time has come for people to recognise that there needs to be a change in that ethic, there needs to be a recognition of the fact that the land management that they engage in impacts on all of our lives; it impacts in a much broader way than just their own property. It is those considerations that lead us, of necessity, to challenge that ethic today.

However, in saying that we challenge it, that does not mean that we have to destroy people's lives. That does not mean that people have to walk off their land. For the vast majority of landowners, it means a continuation of what they are doing currently. I recognise, as members opposite will say they recognise also, that the vast majority of landowners, farmers and graziers do an excellent job in managing their land. We could capitalise on that and engage them in this legislation and its implementation, as I said before, to bring that knowledge to bear. So it is very largely a matter of people not believing that we are imposing draconian things on their lives—because we are not—but recognising a state of affairs that can no longer be ignored.

I want to put on the record some of the facts, some of scientific evidence that we have. I was disappointed when the member for Keppel said that there is no scientific basis for what we are doing. That is not only totally wrong but also, for a member of Parliament, it was incredibly irresponsible to try to pretend that there is no scientific evidence of the need for the changes that this legislation brings about. For the benefit of members on both sides of the House, I would like to refer to some of the material in the State of the Environment report, which was tabled in this House some weeks ago. It is a very sobering document, because it puts out very clearly for all to see and for all to understand the extent of the environmental problems that we face in this State. They are problems that should unite us in our efforts to address them, not divide us, as is happening here today.

Section 3.14 of the document under the heading "Vegetation Clearance" states—

"... it has been estimated that at European settlement about 117 million hectares of Queensland (68 percent of the total land area) supported woody ecosystems ... and approximately half has now been cleared of native vegetation.

...

The larger part of land considered fertile, arable or suitable for introduced pasture and forestry has been cleared and other large areas have been cleared for urbanisation, mining and other purposes. Land clearing was encouraged through government-sponsored settlement schemes for pastoral and agricultural development.

...

Clearing in Queensland continues on a significant scale. A CSIRO study to map the type, severity and extent of land cover disturbance using Landsat satellite imagery estimated that about 3 million hectares of native vegetation almost (2 percent of Queensland) were cleared between 1983 and 1993.

The Statewide Landcover and Tree Study (SLATS) undertaken by DNR provides an estimate of tree clearing using Landsat satellite imagery. Preliminary estimates published in 1997 indicated that the average rate of tree clearing in Queensland in 1991-95 was 262 000 hectares a year ... or 259 000 hectares of clearing in State forests is excluded...More recent estimates indicate that the overall figure for 1991-95 was closer to 285 000 hectares a year...about 55 percent of the clearing occurred on leasehold land, 42 percent on freehold land and the remaining 3 percent on Crown land. Almost 54 percent of all clearing in 1991-95 occurred in the Brigalow Belt bioregion."

To reinforce my point, I refer particularly to that figure of 55% of clearing occurring on leasehold land—that is, on leasehold land where we now have tree-clearing guidelines, people are still able to clear their land. Agricultural activities and grazing activities are still occurring and people are living with those guidelines with no severe detriment at all.

In August of this year, the DNR published a report Land Cover Changes in Queensland 1995-1997, which painted an even more disturbing picture. The summary of results of that document states—

"The Statewide average annual clearing rate for the 1995-97 period was 340 000 ha/year. This figure supersedes all previous 1995-97 change figures produced by SLATS. The average annual clearing rate for that 1995-97 period was 18 per cent higher than the 1991-95 rate of 289 000 ha/year.

During the 1995-97 period approximately 40 per cent of clearing occurred on leasehold land, 57 per cent on freehold land and the remaining 3 per cent on crown land and other tenures. This is a reversal of the 1991-95 situation where leasehold clearing exceeded freehold clearing. The 1995-97 rate of clearing on leasehold tenure was 12 per cent less than the 1991-95 rate while on freehold tenure it increased by 54 per cent."

These were the figures that indicated very clearly to us, as a Government, that our measures on leasehold land were working but there was still an enormous problem in terms of the increased land clearing on freehold land.

It was a very difficult decision to make to address this problem, but it is not something that has been done as policy on the run, as again the member for Keppel tried to paint. This was in our New Directions statement issued prior to the election. It was a fundamental election commitment that we would act to reduce the enormous land clearing that was occurring on freehold land.

In terms of where in particular that land clearing is occurring and its impact, the State of the Environment report states further—

"Mapping of pre-clearing and remnant extent of regional ecosystems in the Mulga Lands, the Mitchell Grass Downs, Brigalow Belt and Southeast Queensland"—

where we have urban development—

"bioregions has indicated large numbers of endangered and of concern ecosystems currently threatened by tree clearing ... These ecosystems have been reduced to less than 30 percent of their pre-clearing extent."

An endangered ecosystem then is one where we have 10% or less of the original tree cover. A bioregion that is regarded as of concern is one where we have between 10% and 30% of the original tree cover left. These are the areas that this legislation is designed specifically to address.

It is these levels of reduction of tree cover which are the danger signals of ecosystems starting to fall apart and salinity escalating at an almost unstoppable rate. Of course, habitat clearance is the major cause of decline or a factor contributing to the decline of endangered species. The State of the Environment Report says—

"Habitat clearance is the major cause of decline or a factor contributing to the decline of at least 44 threatened animal species in Queensland—35 percent of the total number listed as endangered or vulnerable. The disappearance of eight mammal species ... from the Brigalow Belt bioregion and the threatened status of nine reptile species ... mainly confined to the region have been attributed to clearing and the replacement of native ground cover by exotic pasture species."

The evidence then is overwhelming that action is needed. South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales have all recognised the imperative of providing tree-clearing guidelines on freehold land. In Queensland, yes, our challenge is greater because we do have significantly greater areas of forest left, but that also points to the greater responsibility that Queensland has.

The Vegetation Management Advisory Committee, which consists of rural industry stakeholders, conservationists, local government and the Urban Development Institute of Australia, has been working now for some months in trying to arrive at consensus on this issue. Certainly that puts a lie to the claims of the Opposition that there has been no consultation. However, 100% agreement could not be reached largely due to the fact that the Federal Government would not lend support for our incentive package. If we could have guaranteed that that \$100m was available from the Federal Government, I have no doubt that we could have got consensus, we could actually have arrived at an agreement on this issue.

In the time I have left, I want to put on record the purpose of this Bill. My reason for doing this is to really challenge the Opposition as to why everybody would not support these as the goals that we need in Queensland. The purpose of this Bill is to regulate the clearing of vegetation on freehold land in order to preserve the remnant endangered regional ecosystems, remnant of concern regional ecosystems, vegetation in areas of high nature conservation value and areas vulnerable to land degradation; and to ensure that clearing does not cause land degradation, to maintain or increase biodiversity, to maintain ecological processes and to allow for ecologically sustainable land use.

As I said, who on the other side of the House would argue that these are not all reasonable things to do? They are the things that the Queensland community wants us to do. They are things that we can achieve with the cooperation of people in rural Queensland, that we can achieve with the support and the cooperation of people on the land. They recognise, as do we, that those are the goals that we need to aspire to if we are going to have sustainability in our rural areas.

The wisdom of that has been recognised by some of our rural industry leaders. I would like to refer again to some of those press releases that the Premier highlighted this morning in his ministerial statement. Canegrowers chairman, Mr Harry Bonanno, issued a media release on Wednesday headed "Canegrowers support new tree clearing legislation despite the burden". In it he said—

"Queensland canegrowers today described the State Government's new Vegetation Management Bill as workable.

We've been saying for quite some time that a high degree of protection for remnant native vegetation requires a comprehensive policy which applies across all land tenure and all rural industries."

He went on to say that the new guidelines meant that—

"Primary producers in other rural industries would now have to follow the lead of canegrowers in adopting farm plans and leaving remnant vegetation of high nature conservation value when developing new land."

I do call on the Opposition to get the support of those other rural industry leaders, because we know and they know that this makes sense; it is achievable, it can be done and it is consistent, as I said before, with what the vast majority of landowners themselves want to achieve and are doing at this time.

Richard Armstrong, head of the Queensland Farmers Federation, is quoted in this week's edition of Queensland Country Life as saying—

"I believe that farmers can agree to protect biodiversity particularly in endangered and 'of-concern' ecosystems and the costs of this in compensation to farmers is probably manageable to Governments."

I am pleased to say that, despite the reservations of the conservation movement, we have had leading conservation organisations such as the World Wide Fund for Nature welcoming the announcement, saying the guidelines would tackle the vast rate of vegetation destruction in Queensland. The chief executive officer, David Butcher, went on to say—

"WWF congratulates Premier Beattie, and Ministers Welford and Mackenroth on taking some tough decisions for the environment."

He said—

"With the announcement, Queensland becomes the first Government we know of to systematically identify and protect threatened ecological communities—a major achievement.

Threatened wildlife like the cassowary, mahogany glider and Proserpine rock wallaby will all benefit from these laws."

I would like to add my congratulations to the Premier and those Ministers also, because in far-north Queensland it will mean we have additional measures to assist us in the protection of those threatened wildlife such as the cassowary and the mahogany glider. The Wet Tropics World Heritage area does provide significant protection, but there are many areas of rainforest outside of the World Heritage area that need additional protection. There are wetlands along the coastal strip in far-north Queensland that need protection, and this legislation will afford that in partnership with rural industries.
