



Speech by

Mrs LIZ CUNNINGHAM

MEMBER FOR GLADSTONE

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FORESTRY AMENDMENT BILL

Mrs LIZ CUNNINGHAM (Gladstone—IND) (9.31 p.m.): I rise to speak to the Forestry Amendment Bill because of its importance to the livelihoods of many people across this State. We have heard a lot of speakers on this issue say, as did the member for Kurwongbah, that there are speakers on the non-Government side who are scaremongering. However, rather than scaremonger, I want to voice some of the concerns that have been expressed to me and the contradictions I have observed in what has been said by both parties to this agreement.

The Minister, the Honourable Henry Palaszczuk, in a press release issued late last week, stated—

"Central elements of the south-east Queensland Regional Forest Agreement signed by the State Government, timber industry and conservationists in September, include:

at least 350 extra jobs;

planting of at least 10 million trees

a transition to plantation forests over 25 years."

Taken individually those statements sound very good. But I wonder how 350 jobs could be created, when tacked on to that was a statement that 80 timberworkers' positions would be gone and that there was a great deal of disquiet among some in the timber industry. A fact sheet released by the Premier says that, of those new jobs, 30 would be created at MDF Laminex in the Gympie region and 100 would be created in forest estate management in the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service. I really hope that that is accurate and correct. I have looked at national parks management in my own area. We need two foresters to manage the forest at Kroombit Tops to allow better public access. We cannot even get two. One of the big challenges in this State has been the adequate management of national parks and wildlife. With the difficulty that has occurred over the past few years in getting one or two Parks and Wildlife Service rangers in to manage our national parks, I cannot help but wonder how such a glib statement can be made that 100 jobs will be created in the Parks and Wildlife Service.

Mr Veivers interjected.

Mrs LIZ CUNNINGHAM: Lamington National Park is a beautiful national park. I have walked it on a number of occasions. The fact sheet also says that another 100 jobs are going to be created in plantation management. That appears to me to be more feasible. If 10 million trees are going to be planted over the next five years, plantation managers are certainly going to be needed. If the Government is relying on 100 Parks and Wildlife Service people, how are those 100 positions to be created when there have been difficulties in the past in getting one or two rangers? I would welcome them. We have some beautiful national parks that could create a high level of tourism and a high level of recreation for members of the community, had there been sufficient people working in the service. However, as I said, there appears to have been an inability to create even two or three positions let alone 100.

A previous speaker in the debate made a comment regarding the attitude of recreational bushwalkers. On 22 September this year in a letter to a paper, Mr Christensen, from the Environmental Access for Recreation Federation Inc. of Bellbowrie, said—

"The Regional Forest Agreement has been touted by Premier Peter Beattie as a triumph of consultation. The marvellous consultative process has been overestimated. Despite numerous assurances that recreational users of state forests would be considered in the RFA process, we have been overlooked. Recreation and tourism is one of the largest industries in Australia."

That is another one of those contradictions in this whole debate that concerns me. I would be the last person to say that I know all of the detail of the RFA, or indeed all of the detail of the timber industry. Given its importance to timber towns—and I have a couple of small towns in my electorate that rely on timber; it is the lifeblood of those little towns—if their access to timber disappears, and Kroombit has been locked up, then those little towns will suffer socially and economically. It is not just at the mill that the jobs will go. The school will close. The clinic will close. Other positions in the town, at the pub and at the shops, will also go. The economic and social implications for the towns that are particularly reliant on timber are more than just the loss of timber allocations.

In his second-reading speech, the Minister said—

"The Queensland Government plan was underpinned by an agreement between the Australian Rainforest Conservation Society, the Queensland Conservation Council, Wilderness Society, the Queensland Timber Board and the Queensland Government."

There is an imbalance in that list. I know representatives of the three conservation groups—the Rainforest Conservation Society, the QCC and the Wilderness Society—and they are one wonderful people. However, they have a particular focus. If they were included and there was not a balancing number of people available to discuss the timber industry's needs, it is a concern. Again, my purpose tonight is to address the contradictions that have been become evident in the past week.

Cooroy big businessman and Noosa Shire Councillor Ray Kelly said that the town had been sold out by both the Government and Boral Timber. I read that as an introduction to some of the concerns that have been expressed to me by local government. Again, the member for Kurwongbah listed her consultation and the consultation of the Government with local government representatives. She also spoke about a number of mayors with whom they had met. I submit to the Parliament tonight that on 1 December representatives of One Nation and the Independents met with the Mayor of Monto, the Mayor of Woocoo, the Mayor of Cooloola and a councillor from Gympie. Rather than express support for the RFA, they expressed very severe doubts and concerns about it. That was a week ago. It concerns me that, as close as a week ago to this debate tonight, mayors were concerned about the emerging information about the impact of the RFA on their councils.

One of the mayors said that their concern was that the Government had not given sufficient consideration to people in the industry. They were concerned that the Government did not go back to the LGAQ when the final RFA was agreed to with the timber industry and the conservation groups. That final agreement was not referred back to the LGAQ for ratification. It is my understanding that that had been agreed to just prior to the RFA being redrafted. So the LGAQ appear to have been left out of the loop. Another mayor said that they felt that 21 councils all agreed that local government had been sold out by the Timber Board, or perhaps more accurately by the representatives of the Timber Board. He cited to me a statistic which is not directly related to the RFA, but it is an indication of the sorts of repercussions which can accompany these decisions. It is an emotional statistic but, again, my purpose is to table their concerns as expressed to me that night.

He said that after the closure of Fraser Island four workers committed suicide and 14 had nervous breakdowns, such was the impact of the loss of jobs, the loss of revenue and the loss of family stability. That is the last outcome that any of us here would want from this RFA. Again, the Minister and the Premier are saying that the outcomes will be good, positive and just. I hope they are right, because there are people in positions of influence who disagree.

I notice that one million acres of Kroombit, which is partly in my electorate, are to be locked up. I have had a number of tours through Kroombit with timber cutters in order for me to try to be able to identify harvested areas versus non-harvested areas, and it is very difficult. Some timberworkers—I cannot say all, because I do not know them all—work very studiously and very effectively to ensure a sustainable harvest. Not all are cowboys; in fact, very few are.

The local government representatives again said that the Queensland RFA does not conform to the Federal Government's guidelines and therefore the potential is that Queensland will lose \$36m of Federal Government allocations. I have heard the Premier rightly campaigning in this Chamber and through the media to the effect that we remain open to Federal Government assistance. That is critical. The industry needs that money.

Another concern expressed was that whilst there is a discussion about a 25-year supply of timber, it cannot be guaranteed. I notice that the clause in the Bill that discusses the allocation states "of not more than 25 years". I ask the Minister whether that enlivens the prospect of the allocation,

which is touted as 25 years, being reduced at some point in time. The clause says "of not more than 25 years". That does appear to allow an opportunity for that 25-year period to be reduced.

One of the greatest disappointments to these local government representatives was that in the last few weeks they were having trouble gaining access to State Government Ministers. They wanted to express their concerns directly to the Premier and to the Minister for Primary Industries and they were unable to gain access to the relevant Ministers.

The Local Government Association expressed a number of concerns in its submission on the South-East Queensland Regional Forest Agreement directions report. I bring forward to this Chamber some of those concerns. The background outlines a number of meetings that had been held with stakeholders. Members of a forum in which all councils were involved passed the following resolution in April 1998—

"Participants at the forum submit that the south-east Queensland hardwood forests are sustainably managed and that there should be no decrease in logging areas. Rather, that these areas should continue to be made available for managed harvesting and regeneration. Further the forum agreed that this resolution should be supported by the LGAQ Executive only on this basis."

Subsequently the LGAQ executive did support that resolution. Since that time the directions report was released and there was a six-week consultation period for all stakeholders to consider the directions report. The Queensland Local Government Association expressed serious concern that insufficient consultation had been provided to consider the directions report. In addition, councils have stated that there must be consultation on any final recommendations. These local government representatives stated to us on that evening that there was not final consultation on the recommendations.

The Local Government Association raised issues in a number of other areas. It felt that there was insufficient attention given to the impact of the RFA on the rural economy. It felt that there was a lack of consideration given to the negative impact on the economic situation of predominantly rural communities. I have already touched on the fact that if these towns are dependent on the mill and the mill closes, it does not affect just the 40 or 50 people who work in the mill; it affects the schools, the clinics, the hospitals, the shops—the whole lot.

Six thousand people lived in a town in a community of which I was mayor. One of the major industries there sacked 80 blokes overnight. That town, which had a much more sustainable basis than some of these small timber towns, closed up for 18 months. It took them 18 months to recover. It just knocked the guts out of them. They did not expect it. Eighty people were out of a job, but it was not just the fellows who were employed who were affected. It was their wives and their children. The downturn and the depression was felt by the rest of the workers there—the uncertainty, wondering about their futures. When a major industry in an area closes, the implications and the impact are significant.

The LGA also talked about the implications on council planning, particularly in relation to open space and recreation. In great measure in my area this again touches on areas such as Kroombit, which is being locked up as a national park. In principle I do not have a problem with that—it is a beautiful national park—but its value to the community as a replacement investment, whether it be for tourism or whatever, is only as effective as its accessibility.

In the regional office in Rockhampton it has been said by one or two of the operators that Kroombit will not be open for public access any more than currently unless there are rangers in-house. So there has to be a recognition that if these areas are going to be locked up they must be not only accessible for recreation but also managed.

On a regular basis we have experienced the situation that where fire fuel in national parks is not properly managed—that is, the level of fuel that is available in either the forest area or the national parks area—fires start and they sweep through and wipe out rural farms. On a regular basis the farms in the tablelands area and the Boyne Valley area are burnt out because the fires sweep down off Kroombit and take all in their wake. Those farmers take a long time to recover.

The LGA raised a number of issues. It raised the impact on grazing leases and other non-timber forest uses and council's rate base. It raised the issue of sawlog timber allocation and sustainable forest management, which largely negate the need for locking up resources. It raised the issue that consideration must be given with regard to other wood products—that is, non-mill, locally sourced products. It also sought recognition that differences in community and local circumstances in specific areas will dictate alternative RFA outcomes reflecting those differences. It raised the fact that there needs to be a strong commitment from both Commonwealth and State Governments towards the development of hardwood plantations on both State and freehold land.

An issue that will be coming up very soon is the right to clear timber on freehold property. Whilst it is an allied issue, in either of these agreements—whether it is the RFA or tree clearing—it is not necessarily the right of freehold landowners to be able to clear timber indiscriminately if they want, but it is also the right of a freehold landowner to be able to realise a return from an asset which they bought

in good faith. That is tied up with this, because some of the hardwood logs would be available off private land if restrictions that are not too onerous are brought in.

The other issue raised by the Local Government Association was that insufficient consideration was given to social assessments of local communities. I have already touched on the fact that when a mill closes it is more than just the mill workers who are affected.

The Local Government Association said that consideration had to be given to 20-year tenures on stock grazing permits in State forests. It also recommended expanded opportunities to be provided for joint venture arrangements for leases and the State Government with natural regeneration of State forests.

All of this flies in the face of what ultimately was the RFA agreement, but I am concerned that things are being said in support of the RFA agreement that are contradicted by equally valid documentation and statements by people affected by the RFA, and they have been made one week out from this debate. So there is still a lot of concern in the community that has not been addressed. There are still a lot of people who have a responsibility to their local government communities who have concerns that have not been responded to. While ever that occurs, we will not get full support for a document that should be a win-win document that will benefit our community.

My electorate has a timber industry, although it is not as large as the timber industries in many other electorates. The people who work in that timber industry are responsible people. Most of them have had their fathers in the timber industry—in the milling industry—and they were looking forward to their sons and daughters being involved in the milling industry in the future. I would not like to support anything that would jeopardise the responsible management and husbandry of a resource which, over the years, has been looked after. I would not support something that, by implication, says that those people have been poor stewards of the resource in their region, because my observation is that they have not been.

I am not opposed to the Bill per se, but I am concerned that there are such contradictory points of view, one week out from this Bill being debated, when it is touted as a win/win situation. I voice those concerns genuinely. I support the people in my rural area who work very hard to ensure a better future for their communities, and I wish them, through this document and any amendments to this document, every success in their farming futures.
