



Speech by

Mrs LIZ CUNNINGHAM

MEMBER FOR GLADSTONE

Hansard 10 December 1999

VEGETATION MANAGEMENT BILL

Mrs LIZ CUNNINGHAM (Gladstone—IND) (3.36 p.m.): The actions of the ALP Government in introducing this Bill are of significant concern. The Premier has talked ad nauseam of his Government's consultative approach and of how he listens to the community. He has not done that on this issue. The Premier said that on Tuesday, 7 December he met with landowner representatives and environmental representatives in an endeavour to settle some of the outstanding matters. The Premier stated—

"Indeed, yesterday, I met separately with farmers and environmentalists, as did my Ministers. Last night I had a two hour meeting with all the stakeholders and Ministers Mackenroth and Welford. Although there is not complete agreement between all stakeholders, I believe that the result will be seen by fair-minded people as the best possible outcome for the future of the State."

However, the fact is that the finalised form of this Bill was dropped into the House just after 11.30 a.m. the following morning, which indicates to me that the purported consultation was superficial at best. The practicalities of the process of meeting, OQPC redrafting, printing and distribution precludes the meeting being genuine. Additionally, people in my electorate who will be affected by these so-called laws are irate that no time has been allowed for the Bill to be scrutinised by the very people who will be constrained by it.

At the commencement of this term, the Premier said that the time for the maturing of Bills would be extended from seven to 13 days. That extension is to be applauded. However, this Bill is not an emergent. Given its intrusive nature, it is one Bill that should most certainly have been available for proper public review.

Many members of this House wish to represent their communities and they will be denied the opportunity to do so. The members for Barambah, Thuringowa, Tablelands, Burdekin and Maryborough all wanted to speak to the Bill. Members of One Nation, members of the coalition and even members of the Labor Party will not be able to represent their communities' points of view on this Bill, and that is unnecessary. One excuse for that is that clearing on private land was accelerating at an alarming rate. I advise the Premier that the only reason for that is that people feared the very thing that this Government has done. They pre-empted what they felt would be onerous provisions. All that the Government's actions will do is confirm their suspicions.

For me, the obnoxious part of this legislation is not that the Government is proposing to protect rare, endangered or vulnerable species. The Premier has said that the Bill will help reverse the long-term decline in the quality and extent of Australia's native vegetation cover. Provided that this is done in a fair-handed manner, people will adjust. Indeed, many will willingly contribute. The Landcare movement in my electorate is alive and very active. People have shown their concern for the environment. The majority of landowners want to do the right thing. Most landowners act as the stewards of their land for future generations. They would not knowingly degrade their properties, which would in effect devalue the inheritance of their sons or daughters.

What is obnoxious is that this Bill is merely a shell. It is a bundle of words, effectively giving all the discretion to the Minister of the day. Page 40 of the Bill states that the Minister may do this and that. Also, there is no detail of the code, the proposed policies or the plans. If landowners want to get a

copy—and any landowner with any vegetation would be silly not to want to know what will be forced on them—they must pay a fee unless they can access the Internet to obtain the information.

To add insult to injury, the Minister has specifically precluded all proposed constraints from being open to parliamentary scrutiny. Each document is specifically declared not to be subordinate legislation. Given the intrusive nature of the new policies and codes, it is imperative that they be subordinate legislation, and not only because of the regard the Minister should have for the institution of Parliament but because each member could then be informed and inform their constituency as documents are released.

Page 24 of the Bill states—

"For monitoring or enforcing compliance with this Act or a vegetation clearing provision, the authorised officer may—

- (a) search any part of the place; or
- (b) inspect, measure, test, photograph or film any part of the place or anything at the place ..."

Under this Bill the Minister is free to make and change the process at his whim or the whim of whoever has his ear at the time. There will be no review, no effective scrutiny, no accountability and yet, as that clause shows, it is intrusive.

Over the years great efforts have been made for DPI and Department of Environment officers to develop rapport with the community and for mutual trust to develop. This Bill will reintroduce doubt and suspicion. The last time this happened was when the environmental controls on small business were first put in place. A benign survey of wastes was circulated to all small businesses. Then high-cost environmental controls were introduced. We see the same deceit with this Bill.

This is not a win for Queenslanders but a hollow victory for a small group of people who refuse to acknowledge the rural sector's contribution to the community. The Premier and the Minister for Environment should not feel victorious. They may dominate and win this debate because of their numbers, but it is a hollow victory.
