



Speech by

Mr M. ROWELL

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

Hansard 7 December 1999

FORESTRY AMENDMENT BILL

Mr ROWELL (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (10.46 p.m.): In following that two minute wonder, it is quite interesting for me to observe that Queensland is in no doubt about needing a forest industry. Certainly, the hardwood industry is extremely important. To hear that people know it all after a few visits around the countryside is quite remarkable. They probably did not get any sawdust under their fingernails. I think the sawdust is mostly in their heads. It is extremely disappointing.

The timber industry is an important industry. At the present time, we import something like \$2 billion worth of timber products. It is incumbent on us in Government and in Opposition to make sure that the resource is fully utilised to the best of its capacity. I do not think that that has been done with this agreement, and that is our major concern. Yes, we did have an interim RFA we were working through. A lot of scientific background went into it. It was quite important that we went down that track. It is interesting to note that that was about two years or even longer ago. We now have a Government touting that it knows quite a bit about the timber industry. In fact, during its six years in Government I do not recall the planting of any trees at all. In relation to the 32 years before that, this State is now benefiting to a large degree from the many trees planted by the now Opposition when we were in Government. Big areas of softwood plantations are now being utilised. In my particular part of the world, something like 11,000 hectares were planted. Hopefully, in the very near future we will come up with a proposal to use that resource. There are people working at present on a proposal to have a sawmill put in place. In the Tuan area and all through the southern area of Queensland, enormous areas are now benefiting from the plantations established by the coalition when in Government in the early 1960s. They are an important resource for Queensland.

My experience with hardwood plantations in my area is that there have been a number of trials. There have been some problems with getting a species suitable for plantation use. I know that a lot of work has been going on in the southern area of the State, but the Opposition is concerned about the Government pinning so much hope on an industry at such short notice. If it is properly managed, this resource can go on for a long time. I think it is important that the integration of a plantation is carried out. Of course, we do not want to depend on it to the extent that this Government is. If we do and we find that it does not meet the expectation, we may find that many people—sawmills and people who are dependent on the timber industry—will have some difficulty.

I refer to an incident in the Ingham district. A mill that employs something like 17 people needed rose gum for roof battens. Rose gum is quite a hard timber. Unfortunately, the pines are not suitable because they do not meet cyclone specifications. Almost 12 months ago the mill approached the Department of Natural Resources for approval to get a supply of rose gum. It is still waiting for an answer. I think that is absolutely disgraceful. There have been studies conducted. This Government has a propensity to study things to death and not do a heck of a lot. In this instance, those people who are so dependent on that hardwood for the survival of the mill, particularly the employees, do not know what the future holds.

On 19 April representatives of the mill met with the Minister for Natural Resources and Minister for Environment and Heritage at a Community Cabinet meeting in Townsville. There has been no response. There has been no indication of what they are able to do in relation to getting that resource. Of course, the sleeper cutters in that hinterland area, where they are hoping to get the rose gum from, are being left to wither on the vine. That was a very important industry. A large number of people were

employed in it. It is very disappointing to see people just fobbed off, not talked to and not granted permits. They do not know where they stand and they have to take their equipment and whatever possessions they have away from the area in order to try to earn an income in some other type of pursuit. Very often those people are getting quite elderly—they are in their 50s and 60s—and they find it very difficult to adapt to some other form of work.

The World Heritage listing of north Queensland rainforest was a debacle created by a Labor Government in Canberra. It saw tourism as a panacea once the logging stopped. That did not eventuate to the level that was imagined. It has been something like 12 years and only a very limited amount of tourism is going on in some very specific areas.

The hinterland of Ingham contains attractions such as the Wallaman Falls. It was not until the previous Minister for Main Roads, the member for Gregory, came up and consulted with the council that we were able to start to build an all-weather road into that region. It was done through a TIDS program. It was essential that we be able to get people up there in wet weather. That program is ongoing. It was put in place when we were in Government. Graciously, I have to say that this World Heritage listing had to go ahead. Of course, the way to get around the problem was the expansion of the tourist industry. As I said, that did not come into being in the manner we thought it would.

Also, because of the lack of management there are plenty of pigs in the area. We are seeing the infestation of sicklepod. Neighbouring farms are having immense difficulty keeping those weeds out of their farming operations. It is of great concern to those people whose land adjoins World Heritage listed land that the management is extremely poor. It needs to be upgraded. Of course, with the Department of Natural Resources we have seen the demise of forest rangers. Some of them have been expressing concern to me about the management process. Although this Labor Government had much to say about green issues once upon a time, it never really fulfilled those obligations.

During the time the areas were logged, they were taking something like only two trees out of an area the size of a football field every 40 years. Now those trees are decaying. They really never grow into timber. They just fall to the ground and die. I think that is a great loss. When we harvest timber and allow those older trees to be taken out, we allow the younger trees to come up through the canopy. The species survives and goes on.

One of the big issues was job losses. A lot of mills were closed down in the Ingham and Ravenshoe areas. Unfortunately, those workers were on a short-term program for a very small amount of money. At the end of the day, many of them had to leave the district because there were no jobs. I know that there were probably about 100 timberworkers in the Ingham district who were affected by that process.

I am not taking the Minister to task about some of the things he said regarding planting forest but, having been involved in planting some forest myself, I know pretty much what is involved in forest maintenance. First, though, one has to find land on which forest can be planted. It has to have reasonable rainfall. Much of this land is valuable land. The requirements for forest planting are very similar to those of the sugar industry. In the past there has been a lot of competition for this particular type of country. There are probably some ways around that, but I think that is something we have to work through.

The cost of planting is one issue. The grass has to be suppressed for four to five years. One just cannot simply plant a species and walk away from it. It has to be tended—admittedly in some small manner in the initial stages. Once the canopy develops, the extent of tending is not as great as in the earlier stages. Of course, trimming has to be carried out to ensure the development of a good stem. That is another process that costs money.

Any individual involved in growing forests would have to have some other source of income, because forests are a long-term investment. It takes 25 to 30 years to realise anything on the investment. The other important issue is that we actually want to guarantee that after growing these trees we will be able to harvest them. Money is invested over a long period. It requires that additional backing which is so important to anybody who is going to try to do it properly. Forests in a major program can generate some economies of scale. We do not want there to be little blocks planted all over the place.

We certainly have to make sure that we can compete against those very efficient operations in New Zealand, with its softwoods, and probably other countries. Pine mills almost certainly include a drying process. It is not a cheap operation. The capital investment at the Tuan and Caboolture mills is very extensive. That is the sort of investment we need in order to compete against the rest of the world. We need areas of 30,000, 40,000 and 50,000 hectares to ensure that there is sufficient resource to justify investment in the mill. There are some rainforest species being planted by people up in north Queensland such as Errol Wiles, who is a real forest enthusiast. He is doing an excellent job with those rainforest species. I believe that in the future they will have a part to play.

Harking back to the RFA agreement—it is not the type of agreement that members on this side of the House would have put together. And the more that I hear about it and the discontent of the nine mayors and the 16 shires who were involved in a meeting only a week or so ago -

Dr Prenzler: Twenty-one mayors.

Mr ROWELL: Twenty-one mayors altogether? I am very interested to hear that there were that many, because that demonstrates the enormous concern of those people who represent areas that will be impacted upon by the RFA agreement.

I listened to the very emotional speech made by the member for Noosa. That Boral mill at Cooroy will lose quite a considerable income, as will those people who work within that operation. It is going to be very tough for them. I know what happened to the displaced timberworkers after the World Heritage debacle, particularly in my electorate. I believe that it is extremely important that the Government has a solution to that problem if it is determined to go down that track. A load of rubbish was spoken by the member for Logan about what we did or did not do in Government.

Mr Mickel: You didn't do anything. That was pretty easy.

Mr ROWELL: You would not be competent enough to get sawdust out of your head.

Mr Cooper interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Reeves): Order! The member for Crows Nest! I remind the member for Hinchinbrook to speak through the Chair.

Mr Cooper interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! The member for Crows Nest will cease interjecting.

Mr Cooper: Altogether?

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Altogether.

Mr ROWELL: The issue of planting hardwood forests is quite important to the future development of those forests in Queensland—whether it be in north Queensland or southern Queensland. But the last thing that we want to do is raise the expectations of people. Of course, it is an enormous operation. In some instances, the land must be cleared and prepared. I have seen those operations. It is very costly. There is little doubt about that. But at the end of the day, we must be confident that those forests are going to grow at the expected rate.

If we deny those mills the opportunity to access hardwood from existing native forests, where do they stand at the end of the day? Is it a con job, as many members have said? Is it just a political opportunity to get around a very difficult issue that we must face? Or is there some genuineness in this? I would like to hear from the Minister exactly what the proposal is all about, because there has not been a great opportunity for Opposition members to understand fully what it is really all about. I have not seen any plans. Are they available? Where are the areas going to be taken from? I hear odds and ends about a few thousand hectares here and a thousand there, but the areas that the Minister is talking about must be quite substantial. And of course, they should be in a rainfall belt that will allow forests to grow at a satisfactory rate.

Some of the forest areas that are available are very marginal. And if we plant trees and they do not get the necessary rainfall to get them through the predicted period that the Minister is talking about, we could find it quite embarrassing that, in 20-odd years or even sooner, the expected outcome will not eventuate. Trials have been undertaken in wet areas throughout the southern and northern parts of Queensland. We did trials in north Queensland, and some of the material grown was not satisfactory. It just did not perform as it should have. Shell did a number of trials in that district. I know that some eucalypt hybrids have been developed, and they look quite promising. But "quite promising" has to be determined over a long period. We cannot put the faith of the whole industry in seedling developments that have occurred only in recent times, because we cannot be quite sure whether they are going to match expectations. That is a major concern of mine. I would like to see more data on that before I would give any support to this Bill.

I know what the Government is trying to do, but I do not think that it is reaching the required level of expectation. There is no safety valve if things go wrong. The Opposition is particularly concerned about that aspect of this legislation. So I would like the Minister to give us a briefing on exactly what is proposed and the areas that are to be planted. It is easy to cite very large areas and say, "This is where we are going to plant them." But even if they are planted in a rainfall area that is suitable for growth over 25 years, we cannot guarantee the outcome. We cannot guarantee that, somewhere down the track, we will be able to supply the necessary level of timber to sustain those sawmills.

The Opposition is particularly concerned about the sustainability of the industry. We do not want to see people wither on the vine, as I have seen happen under Labor Governments in the past. A lack of experience and a lack of understanding of what an industry is all about has led many people to a very sorry end. I have seen it happen too often in a couple of instances in my part of the world.

Mr Bredhauer: What instances?

Mr ROWELL: The World Heritage listing of the Wet Tropics rainforests and what is happening in the hinterland of Ingham at the present time.

Mr Bredhauer: You go for it, Forrest!

Mr ROWELL: You go for it! The member would not know a road from a dirt track.

Ms Bligh: He's the Minister for Transport.

Mr ROWELL: He is the Minister for Transport, and that is an indictment on him, really. He would not know what he is talking about.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! The honourable member is nearly finished his speech.

Mr Mickel interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! The member for Logan! I suggest we let the member finish his speech.

Mr Mickel interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! The member for Logan!

Time expired.
