



Speech by

**Dr PETER PRENZLER**

**MEMBER FOR LOCKYER**

---

Hansard 10 December 1999

### **VEGETATION MANAGEMENT BILL**

**Dr PRENZLER** (Lockyer—ONP) (12.44 p.m.): I am speechless. This Bill is the greatest load of claptrap that I have seen for a long time. Who dreams up this rubbish? Ever since the early days of European settlement in this State, farmers and graziers have been working their land. The methods used have evolved in the same way that we have evolved in virtually every part of our civilisation. In other words, these methods have evolved by trial and error. Trial and error may not be the perfect method of refining a process but, unlike this legislation, it is surely one that works. This legislation will never work.

For instance, under this legislation the burning of native vegetation is an offence. Does this mean that farmers can no longer burn their pasture at the end of winter? That is a land management practice that goes back thousands of years, even before European settlement. This is the way in which our farmers go about getting rid of the old dry grasses that are lacking in nutrition and encouraging fresh, new spring growth. The Minister says, "No worries. This Bill does not include grass in its definition of native vegetation."

So that means that farmers can go about that age-old land management practice secure in the knowledge that nobody from the Government is going to show up and confiscate his matches, or can he be sure of that? What happens when the local loony Left, tree-hugging greenie sees the smoke, just like the Premier did the other day from his jet aircraft? Being a standard, loony Left, tree-hugging greenie and, therefore, incapable of deep or logical thoughts, that person immediately assumes that the environmental vandal farmer down the road is contravening the laws. So he pops on his brand new badge that the Government gave him when he was anointed an authorised officer and races off down the road to deal with the situation. By the time he arrives, the burn-off has pretty much completed and all he can see is a little bit of blackened grass. He says, "Damn, by the look of it, no law has been broken." However, on closer inspection he spies a couple of gum tree suckers in the middle of the burnt area looking somewhat the worse for wear. Bingo! Destruction of native vegetation on a massive scale!

By the time the officer has disabled the farmer's ute, as per clause 40 of the Bill; confiscated his matches, as per clause 39 of the Bill; and carried out a complete search of his house as per clause 36 of the Bill, it is getting a little bit late in the day. However, being the dedicated greenie—oops, authorised officer—that he is, he sits down and completes his paperwork. He uses the paper that was made by destroying trees!

**Mr Sullivan** interjected.

**Dr PRENZLER:** I hear the members opposite yelling. "Fanciful rubbish", they cry. Just now, I heard the member for Chermside. They shout, "Can't happen."

**Mr SULLIVAN:** I rise to a point of order. That was not what I said. I just reflected on the absence of the Opposition front bench in response to what the member for Warrego said. So the member should not quote me incorrectly.

**Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER** (Dr Clark): There is no point of order.

**Dr PRENZLER:** I challenge the Minister to show me where it is stated in the legislation that this scenario cannot happen. Of course it can happen. This Bill is a draconian document. It gives virtually unlimited power to the Minister and his lunatic greenie mates.

I refer to the guidelines for consultation on regional vegetation management plans. Under this Bill, before the Minister brings down his plans, he is required to consult with an advisory committee and the relevant regional vegetation management committee. That sounds pretty high powered and impressive. However, the trouble is that when one looks a little bit closer, one finds that both of those committees rely completely on the Minister's pleasure for deciding their terms of reference, deciding who will be on the committee and dictating how the committee will operate. Talk about jobs, jobs, jobs: this is jobs, jobs, jobs for the boys, boys, boys. That is right: these committees are jobs for the Minister's mates on the mouldy green fringe of the environmental movement. Members could imagine how vigorously those committees will defend the rights of freehold landowners to go about the business of managing their properties as they see fit. They would not defend those rights very vigorously at all, considering that they owe their position and, therefore, their allegiance to the Minister who appointed them.

If that is not enough power for the Minister, I see that also, under clause 16, the Minister has the power to declare that a stated area is of a high nature conservation value or an area that is vulnerable to land degradation. What a load of waffling piffle! There is not a single square inch of this State that does not fall into one or both of those categories, or which cannot be squeezed into one of them by an overzealous committee member who is out to impress his greenie bosses. Of course, the Minister will argue that he cannot simply make that declaration off his own bat. He will argue that he must go through a comprehensive and time-consuming process of consultation. Unfortunately for the bush, this consultation is again with two committees that are owned and operated by the Minister. The only possibility that the bush has of having their voice heard is through the local government whose area is affected. Of course, very few in the corridors of power in Brisbane will bother to listen to the lonely voice of a single shire council. Recently, we have seen that occur with the RFA. Of course, the greenies are not silly enough to take on too many councils at once. They will pick them off quietly one at a time.

It is just the same as their counterparts in the economic rationalist movement who have quietly and consistently executed our primary industries one at a time. There is less fuss that way. Once again, the Minister will squeal that he is being unjustly accused. He will say that he must meet certain criteria under proposed section 19 of the Bill before he can make a declaration. This House will not be surprised to learn that the criteria cited in proposed section 19 are so broad as to be also applicable to virtually every square inch of this State. Therefore, the Minister can pretty well do what he likes under this Bill.

Proposed section 44 of the Bill allows for anything that has been seized by an authorised officer to be forfeited to the State if the authorised officer who seized the thing reasonably believes it is necessary to keep the thing to prevent it being used to commit a vegetation clearing offence.

**Mrs Pratt:** It's very wide.

**Dr PRENZLER:** It certainly is a very wide statement.

The "thing" referred to in the Bill can be anything from a box of matches or a single document to a D10 bulldozer or, as I said before, the good old farm ute. And this is even before a charge has been laid. That is right, an authorised officer, who does not need any qualifications whatsoever, can enter private freehold property and seize a half a million dollar piece of equipment. Then he can have it forfeited to the State on the basis of a "reasonable belief" that it may otherwise be used to commit an offence. What a disgrace! The State can then deal with this equipment as the chief executive officer sees fit, including the options of destroying or even disposing of it. That is right, one authorised officer, without necessarily having any qualifications whatsoever, acting on what is called "reasonable belief" and a chief executive officer acting separately may seize, forfeit and sell a freehold landowner's equipment without his even being charged with an offence, let alone having been convicted. What an absolute disgrace!

I assure the Minister that the people of the bush can be pushed only so far. They will revolt, and that will not be a pretty sight. The members of this House and the urban populations of this State have to realise sooner or later that the people who inhabit our rural areas do not lead as idyllic a lifestyle as people down here do. In many cases they lead a life that many of their city cousins would consider to be close to hell. They work extremely long hours under conditions that no self-respecting unionist would ever consider for little or no return. They are often quite literally on the breadline. They exist on very basic food, most of which they have to grow and produce themselves. Here we are and this Government even tries to take the firearms off these people so they cannot go and shoot a kangaroo to have a feed of kangaroo stew.

This is not the romantic life of self-sufficiency envisioned by dreamers in suburbia. This is having a veggie garden because without it there would simply be no vegetables. I can assure the Minister that, if there are occasional instances of land degradation as a result of management practices, it is not brought about by the greed of a farmer; it is brought about by the greed of Governments that have allowed the bush to be bled dry in the name of economic rationalism and National Competition Policy.

When a farmer is faced with the choice of not being able to provide for his children or adopting management procedures which may not be in the best long-term interests of the land, he really has no choice at all.

If the Government is in any way sincere about addressing the problems in the bush, including land degradation, salinity, etc. then it must attack the base of the problem, not simply the visible symptoms. It must start by destroying the malicious and destructive National Competition Policy, which is nothing but a blight on the landscape of our farming communities. It must then commence rebuilding what it and previous Governments have been systematically raping and pillaging for many years.

We see the devastation in East Timor on our television screens and are rightly saddened and angered by what has been done to the East Timorese people and their land. Unfortunately, the same people who tut-tut self-righteously about the bad things Indonesia has done to a foreign country in East Timor seem oblivious to the destruction visited upon the people and land of our own rural areas due to some of these Government policies. Perhaps people in urban centres are becoming so emotionally remote from the bush that they consider events overseas to be more significant and of more direct importance to themselves than the plight of our own farmers in the bush. If this legislation is going to make such a positive difference—and I stress the words "positive difference"—to rural areas, as the Minister would have us believe, then why is this Government spending thousands of taxpayers' dollars on advertising? This is a blatantly political exercise to win support for what is incredibly unpopular and divisive legislation.

One of the few things that this Bill will achieve is the driving of yet another wedge between the people of rural and urban Queensland. How can we ever contemplate living in a united, cohesive society when Governments such as this force through legislation—and it is being forced through; it is being guillotined here today without the proper adequate debate or consultation with the communities. As the member for Nicklin has rightly pointed out to the Government, it has not given anybody any time at all to consult with our rural communities. It has not given us a chance to look at the thing. The member for Nicklin rightly said that we have not even had a chance to look to see whether we could formulate some good amendments to this rotten piece of legislation.

**Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER** (Dr Clark): Order! I would like to acknowledge the presence in the gallery of the RSL Girl in a Million entrants. They look very lovely, too.

**Dr PRENZLER:** The RSL is a worthy organisation. I point out to the Minister that today I have tickets to sell on behalf of the Girl in a Million contest.

**Mr Palaszczuk:** How much are you charging for yours?

**Dr PRENZLER:** Only \$2.

How can we ever contemplate living in a united, cohesive society when Governments such as this force through legislation which has the potential to cripple many rural enterprises? One Nation recognises the need to husband our land, but this Bill will not achieve that end. This Bill will only serve to divide the community and endear the Minister and his Government to the lunatic greenie fringe to whom they appear to have such great allegiance.

**Mr Sullivan:** Get on to your conspiracy theories.

**Dr PRENZLER:** I am going to get onto another one now. Yes, they have their mates in Governments, urged on by the rabid and racist environmental daydreamers pushing legislation to curtail the legitimate effects of one of the most industrious and productive sectors of our community seeking to earn an honest living. Not for those people the fast cars, the chardonnay or the social whirl; these are the fair dinkum, down-to-earth Queenslanders who love their land. They are down-to-earth people. They know what conservation is about. They do not have to be told by anybody else how to conserve and grow trees and look after their land. They do not want to destroy it; they have no reason to destroy it. Anybody who believes they have are somewhere in dreamland. They are down-to-earth Queenslanders.

**Mr Sullivan:** They've got all the Landcare programs there, have they?

**Dr PRENZLER:** They certainly have. They have Landcare programs going everywhere. They love their land and their livestock. They seek no more than an income adequate to provide a basic living for themselves and their families. This legislation is evil. It divests these people of the right to earn that living. It takes away the rights that they had previously held in their freehold land. It destroys their aspirations to improve their properties—and it is freehold land—and to establish a legacy for their children and their grandchildren.

I would like to quote from a court case back in 1923—the Commonwealth v. New South Wales. It declared that freehold title was defined as "the most extensive in quantum, the most absolute in respect of the rights it confers of all estates known to law". In other words, freehold title confers absolute ownership. It is my contention that any attempt to legislate to limit the rights conferred by freehold title is illegal. It is theft. It is absolute theft and any Government moving against freehold title has absolutely

no respect for the law. Any Government prepared to trample the rights of a citizen in this manner is showing its contempt for the law and is inviting anarchy, and that is not another conspiracy theory.

Citizens in a democracy should be able to expect the protection of their Government. They should not live in fear of oppression and bullying by the Government itself. Worst of all, this knee-jerk legislation has been introduced without adequate representation, as I said, to obtain compensation funding from the Federal Government. One would have thought that the question of adequate compensation should have been a primary consideration in any such Bill. Unfortunately, all this George Street Government could manage was an unsubstantiated ambit claim delivered in the form of an ultimatum. Governments—or at least ethical Governments—should never contemplate taking rights away from people and their capacity to earn a living without first having made certain that those stolen rights would be properly compensated. Failure to have done so constitutes theft, in my opinion.

**Mr Feldman:** Arrogance!

**Dr PRENZLER:** It certainly would not have been tolerated in the private sector. "Arrogance", as the member for Caboolture just said. It should be even less acceptable action by any ethical Government, and this is not one.

After having stripped freehold land-holders of one of their most fundamental rights without consultation or compensation, this legislation then proceeds to wave a very big stick of incredibly severe penalty provisions. Speaking of fines, I am still intrigued by the definition of "authorised officer". It appears that the only qualification required is that the applicant must be a person. Today it would seem that a carpet layer or pastrycook is fine. They could be an authorised officer tomorrow, conducting in-depth environmental investigations, swaggering about, dishing out \$125,000 fines. I am afraid the concept is rather daunting.

Many of those who may be entrapped by such penalty provisions may well have less equity in their properties than the amount of the fine itself. Their only option then would be to relinquish their land. I ask the Minister: is this another devious tactic by this bush-bashing Government to seize more land, to lock it up and to marvel as it grows noxious weeds, feral animals and provides nothing more than an increased bushfire risk and a safer environment for the broadacre production of hooch? There will be two dingoes, three feral cats and a ragged looking hippy in a Greenpeace T-shirt staggering about among the rubber vine and the marijuana, clutching to his feathered breast a photograph of Imogen Zethoven and Aila Keto. That is biodiversity for you!

This Bill promises to establish a new ecosystem for the one-eyed, Left Wing, mouldy green extremists, like the hippy with the Greenpeace T-shirt and the cockroach-infested hair who idolises Imogen Zethoven, that loyally parochial Queenslander. She is so loyal and parochial that she has called for a boycott of Queensland beef and sugar. Luckily, it is only that old hippy in the Greenpeace T-shirt and the mouldy green Government of Queensland who takes her seriously or there would have been a mountain of unsold beef and sugar. Queensland's economy would have floundered and Australia's balance of trade result would have plumbed new depths.

Many landowners currently have a high debt to equity ratio. This legislation to remove the right to manage vegetation on freehold land will inevitably lead to a reduction in the value of that freehold land. Most farmers' debt relies on the land value of their property as the main component of mortgage security. Reduced property value translates to reduced equity, causing even higher debt to equity ratios. This is a very real possibility. Due to the worsening of that debt to equity ratio in combination with reduced income—both caused by this legislation—banks will be tempted to foreclose on those properties. That is another very compelling reason that the Government should have been more diligent in presenting a case for Federal funding for compensation.

One Nation has respect for their landowners and their responsible attitude towards the maintenance of their land. Although we acknowledge the need for sensible conservation practices, we believe those measures are already being followed to a large degree. We will not accept the vocal minority in the radical environment movements who think they have the right to impose their extremist views to the detriment of owners of freehold land in this State.

An interesting publication, which may go some way to explaining the lunatic agenda that is driving this legislation, is a constitution for the Federation of Earth, as amended at the World Constituent Assembly in Troia, Portugal, in 1991. Apart from espousing the need to become a global community and extolling the virtues of transnational arrangements and a world parliament, the document identifies what its author perceives as 59 world problems. Clause 18 discusses the rabid cutting down of rainforests for wood and agriculture leading to the loss of species, etc. Clause 22 bemoans the use of land that produced tobacco, alcohol, beverages, harmful drugs, sugar and to satisfy meat diets, making a shortage of land for essential food production. Clause 25 discusses "protecting and paying for life, friendly commons and factoring in the costs of maintaining a healthy environment into the price of goods and services." That is where they get that radical rubbish from.

It is morally if not legally wrong for any Government to treat freehold title with contempt. This Government has to be derelict in its duty in removing people's rights without compensation. This has been a knee-jerk reaction by a Government under the influence of the ratbag green minority. It has been a callous reaction by this uncaring Government, which will realise at the next election the folly of treating the people of regional Queensland with contempt. One Nation is totally opposed to this Bill.

---