



Speech by

PETER WELLINGTON

MEMBER FOR NICKLIN

Hansard 10 December 1999

VEGETATION MANAGEMENT BILL

Mr WELLINGTON (Nicklin—IND) (12.34 p.m.): I certainly cannot support the Vegetation Management Bill which is commonly referred to as the anti-farmer Bill. This is a lousy Christmas present for the State's farmers. On the one hand, their rights to manage their own land are being removed, and, on the other hand, the Government is telling them that there is no guarantee of compensation for their losses.

This anti-farmer Bill is taking away the rights of Queensland farmers to farm without guaranteeing them any right to compensation—I repeat, without guaranteeing them any right to compensation. In the Minister's second-reading speech he tried to justify this Bill by saying that it stems from an agreement between the Federal Government and the previous coalition Government. But the buck stops with this State Government because it is this Government's Bill which is taking away farmers' rights, not Federal Government legislation.

There is no guarantee that, if the Federal Government refuses to provide compensation to Queensland farmers, Queensland farmers will receive one dollar from this State Government. We have heard answers to questions this week. There is no guarantee that this State Government will stand behind Queensland farmers by way of compensation if this legislation is passed today. That is a jolly disgrace!

Relationships are built on trust, and this Government is effectively telling the farmers of this State, "We do not trust you to care for your land." When trust goes, so do relationships. This Government has promoted itself as listening to the people. It certainly is not listening now. This Bill is being rushed through the House before members have the time to discuss it with their constituents. What happened to the consultation process which we have heard about from this Government since the election last year? It is a jolly disgrace!

This is the worst piece of legislation to come before the House and, if it passes, this Government deserves to be damned by every farmer in this State. I will repeat that—

Ms Struthers: The issue has been around for years.

Mr WELLINGTON: And I don't take interjections from the Government, either. Certainly, the people who produced this Bill were not working in the interests of the farmers of Queensland. In fact, this is the most courageous Bill that this Government has introduced, and we are only 18 months away from another election—if not earlier. Farmers are the backbone of this State and they are up in arms over this Bill. They are ropeable, and that is putting it mildly.

A Government member interjected.

Mr WELLINGTON: The Government wants ideas. Those opposite cannot even give us the time to come up with some realistic alternative amendments. We are not given a chance to go and talk to our constituents. The Government brings this legislation in here, puts it on the table and says, "Where are your alternatives?" The Government does not give us a chance to come up with alternatives. There is no urgency in this matter.

This Bill is telling farmers that they are not competent to look after their land. The Government is saying, "You can't look after your land. We are going to have some bureaucrats telling you how to do it. Before you clear 10 acres you are going to have to go and apply for a permit." It is a disgrace! I ask the

Government, I ask the Minister and I ask the bureaucrats who put this together, "How do you think the jolly farmers feel about this?" The Government does not give the farmers a chance.

Those opposite simply want to listen to some of the people sitting around their table—people whom those opposite want to talk to. Go and talk to the farmers. More than half the farmers in this State are not members of rural organisations. If one drove down my road, I guarantee one would find that not one of those farmers would be a member of a rural organisation. Those farmers have not been involved.

There is no way in the world that the farmers of this State will sit on their hands while Big Brother, or Government bureaucrats, lay down the law and tell them what to do. The last thing farmers need is more red tape. Those opposite can talk about watching satellites in the sky, about bureaucrats sitting in offices, about the applications that are going to have to be submitted and about increased numbers of jobs. I know where the new jobs will be. The Minister's bureaucracy will be larger than the police force of this State.

Since the election last year we are continually hearing requests in this House for more police and more security in Queensland. The Minister has said, "I am doing the best I can", and he has been doing the best he can. But here we have another police force being formed. Why is it being formed? It is being formed so that it can police what the farmers, the backbone of this State, are doing. It is a jolly disgrace that these bureaucrats are going to police what the farmers have done—and done well.

The arrogance of the bureaucrats who put this Bill together is breathtaking. If those opposite think that the farmers are going to accept it, they are living in cuckoo land. Tell them to get down from their ivory towers and get out into the bush. Let them brief the farmers on the Bill and see the reaction.

Since the election last year we have been through native title, we have been through industrial relations, we have been through the regional forest agreement, and I can go on. I can guarantee that since this Bill arrived in this House I have received more expressions of concern from my constituents than I received in regard to any other matter in the past.

Ms Struthers: And those issues sat in the too-hard basket under the previous Government.

Mr WELLINGTON: I don't accept that from the Government, either.

This Government is here to govern. It is not for this Government to blame another Government. This is the Government's Bill and the Government is responsible for it. We should forget about the farming organisations who may have given the nod to this legislation. Most farmers are fiercely independent and do not belong to organisations. They do not have the time and money to attend some of these committees. The vast majority of farmers care for their farms with a passion. Let us face it: it is in their own interests to do that. Their very livelihoods depend on the viability of their land. That is a fact of life. Farmers do not need an officious bureaucrat who cannot tell the difference between groundsel and wattle telling them what they can and cannot do. Modern farmers—and I am not talking about the toffee-nosed wallies who run their properties while sipping chardonnay in Queen Street; I am talking about the farmers who have dirt under their fingernails and who look after their land—plant trees for shade, clear the noxious weeds, put in good pasture and plant trees for timber for use and to sell. These farmers want the security of knowing that, if there is a stand of wattle that needs clearing, they can clear it without going cap in hand to some flunkey bureaucrat in some departmental office who is going to say, "I want to see an application. I want to process the application." We have backlogs in the processing of applications already. The Government is saying that jobs are going to be created, but they will not be created through the provision of more police, but through more bureaucrats to police the farmers.

An Opposition member: Do you know how much the permits are going to cost? \$250.

Mr WELLINGTON: That is a jolly disgrace, too.

I find it ironic that, although the Government finds it difficult to provide the extra police to fight crime, when it comes to finding the means to police this Bill, it appears that there is not a problem. Money is no problem when the Government wants to find police officers to police the farmers; it is in the Budget. However, where is the money for the compensation? Where is the guarantee that this Government will review this Bill if the Federal Government will not give the money? There is deadly silence. Yet when it comes to finding money to employ bureaucrats to police the farmers, to send the satellites up in the sky and so on, it is not a problem. I can assure the Government that this will be a problem in Queensland. I certainly will not be sitting on my laurels in Nicklin and watching this Government simply run over the farmers—those people who do their best to look after their farms. This is not a one-sided equation. On the information that I have been receiving in my electorate, by crikey, the Government is in for a fight and it should be ready.

This morning in answer to a question, to the best of my recollection the Minister said that the \$100m package that this Government is putting to the Federal Government has been well and truly detailed. The Minister stated further that it has not only been well and truly detailed but also that it has

the full support of the rural industry. Approximately an hour ago, I took the time to speak to Mr Paul Bidwell, the general manager of Agforce. I asked him what was the position in relation to this comment that the Minister had made. He said words to the effect that Agforce wants to see the principles and the standards on which this compensation is based before they finally sign off. I understand that he is at the moment preparing a letter to the Government.

Mr Hobbs: Where are all the rest of the Ministers? Only one is here.

Mr WELLINGTON: I am referring to the comments that the Minister made in the House today. To the best of my recollection, the Minister made those comments this morning. I have taken the time to contact the general manager of Agforce, Paul Bidwell, to ask him what Agforce's position is, because so far what has been reflected is that the Government has the full support of the rural industry. Quite clearly, his answer to me is not consistent with the answer that the Minister gave this morning. This morning, the Minister has either deliberately misled the House or has been misinformed by his department. I ask the Minister to apologise to the farming community for his error this morning.
