



Speech by

**Hon. R. E. BORBIDGE**

**MEMBER FOR SURFERS PARADISE**

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Hansard 30 November 1999

### **TREE-CLEARING GUIDELINES**

**Hon. R. E. BORBIDGE** (Surfers Paradise—NPA) (Leader of the Opposition) (6 p.m.): I move—

"Recognising the threat of mandatory tree-clearing guidelines and the unresolved question of compensation for loss of property values and viability, this State Parliament supports:

- (1) protecting Queensland's environment and putting an end to 'panic clearing' by declaring a moratorium on any plans to introduce mandatory tree-clearing guidelines on freehold land;
- (2) the introduction of voluntary, scientifically-based tree-clearing guidelines on a regional basis to be prepared over the next 6 months;
- (3) the State providing full compensation for any loss in property value or viability for the protection of areas of high conservation value;
- (4) the State Government and industry groups conducting an education campaign to inform producers of the voluntary guidelines and recommended practices;
- (5) continued satellite monitoring by the State Government and collaborative scientific studies with industry to ensure such guidelines facilitate sustainable vegetation management; and
- (6) a commitment by the State Government that if such studies prove to result in sustainable vegetation management practices being adhered to, the voluntary tree-clearing guideline program be maintained."

The issue of developing a good agreement for tree-clearing guidelines on freehold land in this State was always going to be an awkward and tough job for whoever was in power. There was always going to be a significant natural reluctance from freeholders to constraints on their land management practices. The fact that pastoral groups representing freeholders accepted a responsibility to engage the process is a great credit to them. Obviously, the role of Government was to respect that and, in return, to be up front in relation to the clear obligation for compensation for lost production where clearing was restricted by any negotiated outcomes.

Obviously, restrictions on clearing mean restrictions on productivity. Restrictions on productivity mean restrictions on income. The biggest and an incredibly obvious short-term danger in the negotiation process was always going to be that poor signals from Government would lead to a self-defeating outbreak of pre-emptive clearing. That is precisely the outcome that the immaturity and incompetence of this Government has brought about.

Their first major mistake was their belatedness in picking up issue. The agreement with the Commonwealth on moving towards a negotiated outcome was signed by me on 5 November 1997. The first meeting of my regulatory framework for vegetation management task force was on 7 November, within 48 hours of that signing. The target was to have a report by June 1998. Our emphasis was on a commonsensical, achievable, negotiated outcome with respect to the rights of freeholders. The election interfered with that, but a great deal of the hard work was done. All that was needed from the new Government was momentum to maintain those good-faith negotiations. In fact, the situation, let alone common decency, demanded that. However, this Government did not pick up

the ball until March. In all the circumstances, that was an inexcusable delay. It was a major factor in the increased clearing, or at least increased applications for clearing, that the State has since experienced.

Understandably, the delay shook the confidence of industry. Another major factor in promoting those applications and in bringing about the crisis we now have has been the ridiculous performance of Imogen Zethoven of the Queensland Conservation Council, whose outrageous demands, given the assumed and real close alliance between the QCC and the ALP, have helped immeasurably undermine confidence in the bush in achieving a sensible outcome. Add to her contribution the lack of performance by the Minister for Environment and the inability of the Premier to resist a stunt, and we find that the greatest environmental vandals in the recent history of this State are not farmers applying for tree-clearing permits, rabbits or feral pigs, but the member for Brisbane Central and the member for Everton. To the extent that there has been panic clearing, they are chiefly responsible.

In fact—and this is the ridiculous irony—the extent of that clearing may not be and probably is not anywhere near the level that has been counterproductively claimed by the Government. For example, in one of the most irresponsible of his many irresponsible and inflammatory statements on this issue, the Premier has claimed that 20% of the nation's entire greenhouse emissions have occurred as a result of land clearing in Queensland. That number is simply not sustainable. It is simply part of the silly, immature, counterproductive scaremongering by the Government that has contributed mightily to the problem that we now confront. I refer to the Premier's credibility. For the benefit of the House, I table the seven-page overview of the Australian Greenhouse Office's 1997 national greenhouse gas inventory, which was published just a few weeks ago in September. It accepts the very latest assessment on greenhouse gas impacts in Australia by the Commonwealth instrumentality charged with undertaking those assessments. The opening page states—

"Land clearing emissions currently are not included in the national total due to continuing uncertainty in the estimates. The current best estimate of land clearing emissions in 1997 is 65 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalents—down from 103 million tonnes in 1990."

Allowing for a considerable margin for error in what is obviously a very difficult area of science, in that year there was, in fact, a significant reduction—almost 40%—in the amount of greenhouse gases emerging from tree clearing in this country. In other words, when the coalition was handling this issue, there was no panic clearing, because land-holders had confidence that their concerns were being given proper consideration.

The fact of a decline in greenhouse emissions from tree clearing does not compute with the doom and gloom assessments of the members opposite, which has bred doom and gloom. It does not compute with the propaganda that the member for Brisbane Central and the member for Everton push around the newsrooms that Queensland accounts for 80% of tree clearing and 20% of national greenhouse gas emissions. According to the Commonwealth greenhouse data, forest and grassland conversion right across Australia contributed a gross 19%, net 15%, to greenhouse gas creation in this country.

Another area in which numbers have been simply fictionalised by the member for Brisbane Central and the member for Everton and by Ms Zethoven in their bid to generate panic clearing in this State concerns the emotive figure of 340,000 hectares of land cleared each year from 1995 to 1997. The SLATS fact sheet from the Department of Natural Resources carries this qualification—

"The proportion of clearing which was for regrowth control is still being fully determined. However, preliminary results indicate at least 18 per cent of 1995-97 clearing was for regrowth control. Further studies of historical satellite imagery may confirm that it was much higher than this."

So for starters, we can at least discount the 340,000 hectares by 61,000 hectares to 279,000 hectares. As DNR data for clearing applications for 1998 shows, upwards of 80% of that 1997 clearing could, in fact, have been for regrowth.

Obviously, the most disturbing numbers—the genuinely disturbing numbers—are in relation to the current year. Up to August, the department had received applications for clearing 225,000 hectares of land not previously cleared and 164,000 hectares of regrowth. I suggest that, on any sane reading of the data that is available, if we have a significant problem in relation to clearing, it is on the basis of the permits that have been issued so far this year, not on the gratuitous distortion by the Government and others of earlier data. I lay the responsibility for that outbreak comprehensively at the feet of the current Government. It has consistently misrepresented data in a manner that could not have been more effective in sowing panic and bringing about a clearly undesirable outcome had it been designed specifically to do so.

In summary, the Government started inexcusably late on this process. It has irresponsibly consistently misrepresented the data in a way that was so biased that it was certain to bring about the outcome that we now confront. It has irresponsibly misrepresented the Commonwealth, which is on

record as indicating a preparedness to engage the compensation issue if approached professionally and not in the ridiculous, immature fashion that we saw at the weekend. The Government has also irresponsibly misrepresented the rural community, upon which it must rely for any sensible outcome on what looks increasingly like more bush bashing to curry electoral favour in the city than a serious attempt to deal with the very real and very important issue at hand. Above all, it has been an immature performance by the Government.

My appeal is simply this: go back to the negotiating table and talk sensibly to the representatives of primary producers. If the Government is prepared to do so, it will get a sensible outcome. The Government should talk sensibly to Robert Hill. There should be no more silly faxed demands for \$100m by close of business Sunday. That ultimatum reached his office at 8 p.m. Saturday. That is juvenile stuff. This issue is far more important than another hubris-driven headline for the member for Brisbane Central. The Premier should stop doing stunts and start doing the job, or he will have an environmental and political disaster on his hands that will be totally of his own making.

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