



Speech by

Hon. RUSSELL COOPER

MEMBER FOR CROWS NEST

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FORESTRY INDUSTRY

Hon. T. R. COOPER (Crows Nest—NPA) (11.30 a.m.): I wish to draw to the attention of the House the massive uncertainty created in the bush by the Beattie Labor Government. I refer in the main to the timber industry but, of course, to many other issues as well. I want people to remember Ravenshoe, the logging industry around the Burnett and the Fraser Island area—an area that had been logged for 100 years—all of which were closed down with great promises of compensation. Any time the Government mentions compensation in relation to an RFA, people should know that they should take not the slightest notice, because no compensation of any value ever reached those particular areas.

Now, in spite of the rhetoric that we have been hearing, hardworking Queenslanders have been forced to defend their jobs. Those people who have come down from many areas of south-east Queensland today should never have had to do so. The regional forest agreement, the RFA, was one of those arrangements that was supposed to take politics out of forest debates. Instead, this Government has abused those regional forestry agreements in order to close down an industry and also to reiterate and support its own policy.

Its own policy was pointed out by Mr Charles Hamilton who, on Thursday, 25 March 1999, sent an email in the body of which he urged people to write to the Premier and urge the Government to reject the industry position, that is, the Queensland Timber Board/industry position. His main point was that he wanted the Government to support an industry transition out of native forests into plantations as required by Labor's biodiversity policy, a critical element in the conservation movement's support for Labor at the last election. That is the nub of the issue—lock, stock and barrel. That is why we have the delay in the regional forest agreement. It has nothing to do with extra funding from the Federal Government. This Government has the full responsibility to ensure that it enters into a regional forest agreement with the native forest timber industry. That is what they are supposed to do. That is what the arrangements are supposed to be all about. What the Government is hell-bent on doing, of course, is closing down a great deal of our native forest area.

No option in the Government's directions report will ensure that there will be no jobs lost. Every single option in that report means that some jobs would go. Worse still was the Beattie Government's insistence that the two most extreme options be included in that directions report: one option was to shut down 500,000 hectares of native forest; another option was to shut down 620,000 hectares. And this was supposed to be a jobs, jobs, jobs Government! We have seen the deal that was done with the green movement prior to the last election in exchange for preferences as outlined by Charles Hamilton and in line with a secret Labor Government policy.

Last week we saw the Beattie Government make a half-baked attempt to hose down today's rally. The Deputy Premier thought he could pacify the people with his vague commitment to boosting plantations. In the Courier-Mail of 15 July, he said—

"... the only way to protect the environment was a major boost in hardwood plantation forestry."

No-one disagrees with plantations. It is just that it takes 30 or 40 years for these things to produce suitable product. What on earth does the timber industry do in the meantime? What happens to all those jobs, those industries, the productivity and the whole gamut of communities in the south-east of

this State? That is the point that was missed in the deal for a few lousy preferences at the 1998 election.

Also, we have seen the Deputy Premier giving instructions to some of the minor elements of his backbench to go into the forestry areas to gather information. Instead of fronting up himself, he relies on those people who have been sent out as cannon fodder. He knew very well the reception that they would receive and he now knows of the reception that they did receive. No-one will be happy unless we have a regional forest agreement that will ensure that the native forests of this State can be utilised, not all closed down. It is a very well run industry. The forestry agreements, the forestry arrangements and all of the management processes that have been used for 150 years are still appropriate today and still allow for centuries of use, because those in the timber industry are the last people who would want to see their own industry closed down through lack of timber. They are nurturing the timber; they nurture the native forests. There is no-one better to do that than they; yet the inexperienced members opposite with their half-baked ideas have sold them down the drain for a few lousy preferences.

In the context of the regional forestry agreement, which the Government is imposing on the timber industry in south-east Queensland and on the soon-to-be former jobs of timber workers, it is very interesting to read an article by former leading Labor politician Peter Walsh, which was published in the May edition of Quadrant magazine. In the course of that article titled "Labor and the Greens", Mr Walsh has this to say about the Greens and the timber industry—

"Although the timber industry is less important than mining to the national economy, it is the most persistently targeted for attack. Sawmills are more likely to be found in a benign climate than mines, and forests are better subjects for television and video. Radical and secular damage"—

that is, secular in the context of the article in the sense of fellow travellers on the fringes of the environmental movement for whom God has been replaced by all of his creatures and species and by Gaia, as Peter Walsh engagingly put it—

"to mining via exploration bans is long-term rather than immediate. Very few operating mines have been shut down. The timber industry has been less fortunate."

Mr Walsh points out also that an earlier Labor Party, the Labor Party that was still in genuine communion with its worker roots, would have been expected to resist sawmill closures and gratuitous destruction of blue-collar jobs in regions of higher than average unemployment. Yet he also points out that Labor Governments, Federal and State—with the exception of South Australia, which has only plantations, and the partial exception of Tasmania—have implemented most of the Green agenda. The Beattie Labor Government is heading down exactly the same dusty track. If it is not stopped, it will have the same dead-end effect on many Queenslanders.

I quote again from the Quadrant article at some length, because it is important that this Government be shown the folly of its ways. I know this is a history lesson, but it is one that apparently still needs to be learned. In terms of the late 1980s, the article goes on—

"Labor governments naively believed deals could be made which would deliver generous Green electoral support, but allow most of the industry to survive. Federal Labor took this up with more enthusiasm than any State—with the possible exception of New South Wales— using (abusing?) its foreign affairs and export control powers to overrule or threaten to overrule the State forestry management. In Tasmania, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, the federal government decreed major extensions of logging bans. Invariably these were rejected by radicals and seculars. The government responded by extending boundaries again. Labor failed to realise that every deal, agreement or compromise is regarded not as a settlement but as a launching pad for the next ambit claim."

Mr Walsh, who represents the sensible—one might say "rational"—faction within the Labor Party, territory he now shares with Third Way thinkers such as Mark Latham and Lyndsay Tanner, makes some sensible remarks about a flexible definition of "old-growth forests". Perhaps he had Fraser Island in mind where forest logged for 100 years was accorded World Heritage status. These points are all relevant to the South East Queensland Regional Forest Agreement.

It is abundantly clear that the Beattie Government has taken a particular view on environmental matters. It seems that in any contest whatsoever, especially between a frog and an economic option, the frog will win every time. In other words, it is very doubtful that the Beattie Labor Government, for all its public relations efforts, is in the end any different from Labor administrations elsewhere or the late Goss Labor Government when it comes to doing damage to Queensland's two chief endangered species: the family and the worker. Once upon a time, members opposite were supposed to stand up for those elements: the blue-collar workers, the timber workers, the people in the country towns, the battlers—the people who have made this State great. Labor is hell-bent on destroying it and bringing them down. This issue will hang around Labor's neck like an albatross, because the people currently demonstrating outside this building know what has happened. They would not have spent their time

coming down today to make a statement—something they should never have had to do—if it were not for the fear of the actions of members opposite.

This is not a difficult decision to make. It is very easy to decide to ensure that we maintain and utilise our native forests to the best effect for the people of this State instead of closing them down. That is the worst thing that Labor could possibly do. We know that, even if compensation is offered, the fact is that that compensation never gets through. We are not interested in it. Our emphasis is on maintaining those jobs and keeping those communities alive.

Time expired.
