



Speech by

Hon. RUSSELL COOPER

MEMBER FOR CROWS NEST

Hansard 10 December 1999

VEGETATION MANAGEMENT BILL

Hon. T. R. COOPER (Crows Nest—NPA) (11.47 a.m.): Mr Deputy Speaker, just before I speak to the Bill which, of course, does not give me any pleasure, I would like to acknowledge, with your indulgence, the kind words of the member for Warwick which I believe were assented to by other members opposite as well—the member for Logan and the Minister for Primary Industries. I regard that as being extremely generous.

I also say that it has been a pleasure to have been involved with Primary Industries for the past 18 months. I know that sometimes my interjections might have been a little strong and hurtful towards those on the opposite side of the House, but there were no hard feelings intended. I have always been robust in the way I play it, be it on the sporting field or in the Parliament, but I think that that will be taken in the right spirit. Anyway, it is back to work. I will now turn to the Bill.

Mr Mickel: We have just said good things about you.

Mr COOPER: I know the member did. I was not being nasty at all. I just said that it is now time to go back to work; we have a job to do. I only have 20 minutes—19 now—in which to do it.

I want to mention the member for Barron River, who has obviously made a very forceful and heartfelt contribution. I am fully aware that she is very sincere in her desire to see good conservation legislation. Her background is in that field. However, we, too, on this side of the fence have our point of view and our feelings are just as strong as far as the environment and our land is concerned. Many of us come from the land and have been brought up with it and have had a lot of experience. I am not saying that we know it all by any stretch of the imagination, but we have certainly learned a lot.

I remember back in the early sixties in my area a lot of tree clearing, burning, pasture improvements and aerial seeding was carried out, and that turned that country into very productive country. Even back then I thought that some of the tree clearing that went on was pretty severe—perhaps too severe. I think we have learned a lot from that. We have learned that we do not do it like that any more. The best way to learn is from one's experiences and mistakes. We are the custodians of the land. We want to leave it better than it was when we found it. That is the task that has been set before us. Ninety-odd per cent of people recognise the need to do it and do it well so that the land is left in a good state. In that way it will remain productive. If we abuse it, it will not remain productive and we will pay a frightful price.

We do not believe that we need to have legislation rammed down our necks to do that. It is like a gun held to our heads. That is the way people who are ringing me are feeling. They include farmers, primary producers generally and people involved in the timber industry. They are saying, "We now have to go cap in hand to get a permit to manage our properties." Those experienced people believe that trust in them has been removed and that they are no longer allowed to get on with the management of their places. They feel that trust has been denied them. They are feeling very angry, confused and uncertain, because the Bill contains not nearly enough detail for them to make a contribution to the next stage of consultation. The confusion is causing anger, because they are uncertain about their livelihoods. The member for Barron River said that the Bill would not affect their livelihoods. I point out that it is already affecting their livelihoods, because people have made enormous investments in the land. Many of those investments have been cut in half. Stock and station agents have already lost thousands of dollars in commissions, because sales have been withdrawn. Markets are falling now.

Members opposite should not say that the Bill is not affecting people's livelihoods; it is. The issue need never have gone this far, because the management of most primary producers is exemplary. Labor knows it. That is what is so unfortunate about the Bill.

The other unfortunate aspect is that the Premier gave a promise that he would not gag this legislation and rush it through the Parliament. He gave that commitment to the stakeholders with whom Labor claims to have been consulting. The Bill was introduced on Tuesday and it will go out the door on Friday. It is like a car without an engine: the Bill contains no detail. We may see the State policy on Monday. The Government will be distributing a booklet that will tell us all about the plan. We are putting this legislation through on Friday when we have not even seen the State policy and the regional plans. We do not know how they will be formulated. We are making decisions about things we know nothing about. That is what is so sad and so tragic. It is unbelievable that it can be done this way. It has proven to be a massive and cruel confidence trick on people who simply do not deserve it. Over the past decade, they have been belted from pillar to post with all sorts of legislation and all sorts of difficulties, including droughts and falling commodity prices. Now they have to wear this legislation. I wonder how much more they can wear. When Wayne Goss tried this when he was Premier, that started a bushfire in the bush like nothing on earth. It brought him unstuck on many of the aspects we have talked about. This was one issue that brought him unstuck. It will bring the Beattie Government unstuck as sure as night follows day. Those people who have put their faith and trust in the land have had that faith and trust removed. That is why they are so angry.

It has been said that there is no moratorium. There is a moratorium because of the way this legislation has been drafted. Under IPA applications, there will be a moratorium of at least 12 months to December 2000. Applications are normally required to be dealt with within 20 to 60 days. Until 31 December 2000, those time frames will not apply. There will be no limit on how long DNR and in some cases local governments take to consider an application. That is the worry. We know that that wait will be at least 12 months. Some people will say, "That's good. We can hold things up." However, many people have management plans to implement. Now they will not be able to implement them.

Mr Littleproud: What about the contractors?

Mr COOPER: Upon proclamation of this legislation—which will probably be next week—the livelihoods of contractors will be finished for—

Mr Littleproud: Two years.

Mr COOPER: They will be finished for at least 12 months and possibly two years. What compensation do they get? They get none.

Mr Borbidge: He will be the one handing over his machines to the finance company now.

Mr COOPER: He has to take them there and ask, "Where do you want me to park them?" That is where his machines will go, because there is no future. Members should not say that this legislation will not hurt people's livelihoods. It will affect all the stakeholders and affect them badly.

I will address some of the queries that have been phoned through to me by members of the timber industry. The Minister might like to respond to these questions in his reply. I am seeing those people tomorrow. I have to try to give answers to questions that even the Minister and other members on that side of the House cannot answer. Do the new tree-clearing guidelines include millable timber on freehold land of a sawmill? What about as-of-right use of millable timber on freehold land? Are permits required before trees are used for sawlogs? From my first reading of my brief I believed that they would not be affected. However, upon thinking about the issue and realising that they have to comply with a code of practice, I think that they will be affected. Up to 50% of the timber that they use as sawlogs now will not be able to be used. What compensation do we see for them?

Mr Welford: Forestry code of practice?

Mr COOPER: Yes. Millable timber on freehold property is an issue that the Minister can address in his reply. I believe it will be affected. In the meantime, there will be enormous confusion in the community.

Who will decide what is 30% of the pre-European—pre-1788—trees? Who will decide that? I suppose the Minister will use a few maps to decide what is 30% in a regional area. It is not 30% of, say, my property at Wallumbilla; it is 30% of the entire area, say the Maranoa area. To use my place as an example, if the region has reached the 30% limit and I still have some timber clearing that I want to do, it is too bad; it is all over red rover. I cannot carry out a management plan. People will be confused about that provision. They will say, "I haven't got 30% of my property." It will be too bad for them; the figure applies to the entire region. None of the regional plans have been put in place. They will take a couple of years to put in place. When we lodge our application to carry out our management, we know we will have to wait at least a couple of years before we get any satisfaction. When the entire region—say, the Maranoa or wherever—is taken into account, the applicant will find that the 30% has been reached, and that person will never get a management plan under this legislation. That is why the

coalition will have to turn this around. We will have to review this in order to make sure that we have manageable legislation under which people can get on and work their properties, because this legislation will affect them badly.

I will discuss compensation briefly. Very little to nothing has been mentioned in the Bill. All members opposite do is blame Senator Robert Hill. All the other States that have already introduced their own vegetation management legislation have all put up their own money.

Mr Sullivan: He says he's got the money there.

Mr COOPER: They have not received money from the Federal Government. South Australia put up its own money. If Labor members want to foist this legislation on the people of this State, they should put up the money and pay for it. They should not try blaming everybody else.

Mr Sullivan: He says he's got it there, and you won't do anything.

Mr COOPER: That is an absolute furphy.

I refer the member for Chermside to an editorial in the Queensland Country Life. I think he will find that very interesting reading, because it expresses the feeling of people in the bush. If the member does not believe me, he should stick around, because they will be letting him know in no uncertain terms. We heard from the member for Barron River about a comment made by the Queensland Farmers Federation, Agforce, and Canegrowers. The President of Agforce, Larry Acton, is a very strong leader. I am pleased to see him in that position, because he will stick up for his members. He remembers the sell-out on native title about five or six years ago—perhaps more. One must not forget that. In this business, leaders have to perform and represent their members. If they do not, the members will leave in droves. Larry Acton knows that. He is a very strong leader. He has no faith in this legislation. He knows the damage it will do to his membership.

As to Richard Armstrong and Harry Bonanno—I know them well. I like them as people. In this case they have got it wrong. When they sell out to those interests, against the interests of their own members, they will pay a price. That is something that they will have to live with. If they want to be all wishy-washy and cannot stick up for their members, in a few years' time, when membership becomes voluntary, we will see how many members they will retain. They should make sure they look after their people in the first place.

This now paves the way for bureaucrats to become tin gods and to be able to dictate to farmers—farmers who may have been in the business for generations. Farmers will have to go cap in hand to get a permit. These bureaucrats, who may know nothing about what they are doing, will be able to come onto properties and tell farmers whether they can have a permit and how to manage their land. I appeal to those people not to get too cocky in telling farmers how to conduct their business. They should have some respect for the people who have to live with the sorts of things that are to be implemented. They should have some respect for people who know a darned sight more than they do.

I have mentioned compensation. Very little to nothing to do with compensation is contained in this Bill, yet it was one of the main sticking points of the discussions. Compensation is a secondary thing. The first thing people want is to be able to get on with their lives and manage their properties. If that is to be denied them, then who pays them? Who compensates them? I know that they will get nothing. The Government is perpetrating a massive confidence trick on people on the land. That will become evident; they will not get a cent.

It has been mentioned that clearing is prohibited in regional ecosystems. This will affect about 4.3 million hectares across the State, of which 2.25 million hectares is in the brigalow belt. Anyone who knows anything about brigalow knows that its regrowth is one of the most difficult things to deal with, yet the Government wants to protect it. People have made large investments in developing their properties and the Government wants to let them go back to regrowth. Once brigalow gets to a height of about four feet it is so thick and so dense that a dog cannot bark inside of it. All of the pasture improvement carried out by land-holders will be to no avail. It will be all over, red rover. There will not be any compensation to those people, either.

I turn to the issue of regrowth. Areas declared as being of high nature conservation value or as vulnerable to degradation will be protected. Otherwise, regrowth is not caught. How is that decided? Do some of these bureaucratic tin gods come and say where these areas are? How long will it take them to get there? They will not have a hope of finding out.

Riparian buffers on leasehold land are to be 200 metres for rivers, 50 metres for creeks and 20 metres for gullies. In some parts of Queensland there are gullies running all over the place. That means that land-holders have no hope of working within those guidelines. That country will also go back to the state it was in, which is far worse. It will be the sort of land that cannot be managed and cannot have stock run on it. That is the sort of thing the Government is doing. It knows not what it does.

The provisions relating to ongoing maintenance are rippers. The Bill states that essential management will be exempt in all areas and that routine management will be exempt except where the

timber is endangered, of concern or in an area of high nature conservation value. Again, who decides that? We are talking about ongoing maintenance. The land-holder may want to put up a fence, develop a fire break and so on, but someone will need to decide whether they are nearing some patch of concern. The land-holder might go ahead and do it because he needs to put a fire break through, but someone can come and fine the daylight out of him. There are fines of up to \$125,000. Land-holders cannot wait for people to come onto their properties and tell them where they can put their fire breaks. Obviously in a dry summer, when fire danger is high or imminent, people need to be able to act and act quickly. That flexibility will be removed.

There is no flexibility with this Bill. We talk about regional plans and advisory committees. We talk about representation from the QFF, the QCC and so on. What is the point if there is no flexibility? Who is going to decide it? It does not matter. It is all set in stone. Having the representation is one thing; them being able to do something about it is another.

The Minister talked about leasehold land. All of the leasehold guidelines now go out the door and are superseded by this Bill, which makes leasehold land consistent with freehold land. The Government has said that existing permits can continue, but those who have applied must now go cap in hand and wait up to two years for permits.

We talked about the DPI analysis. If the DPI report is a politically motivated document, as the Premier has said it is—he has accused DPI officers of being politically motivated in putting out this report—if it is a furphy, if it is of no consequence, if it is nonsense and the Minister is going to throw it in the rubbish bin or shred it, then why does the Minister not table it? The Minister should let us look at the report. We can tell the Government whether or not it means something. If it is a furphy then let us get it out of the road, but if it is not tabled then how on earth will we know? The confusion, doubt and uncertainty will remain.

Mr Borbidge: They obviously do not want it independently assessed.

Mr COOPER: That is right. Of what value is this document if the Government is not even going to use it? If the Government has conducted analysis of the effects of this legislation on land-holders, then it should let us look at it. If it is bad, we may need some more funds for compensation. On what will the Government assess applications for finance or compensation when it is not even going to use the reports that it has? If I were the Minister, instead of chucking the report in the bin I would have a very good look at it and I would not condemn the officers who prepared it. That is shooting the messenger. I would table the document so that others could use it.

The State policy is the very basis upon which this legislation will operate. We have not seen that document and we will not see it. If we see it on Monday, that is our good luck. Today we will be voting on this matter but we know nothing about the State policy. We will oppose this Bill because we cannot agree to the passage of legislation when we do not know the very basis of it. We may find out more on Monday, and then probably on Thursday the Government will have the Bill proclaimed and it will become law. Then everything will fall to the ground.

I do not understand how the Government can do business in this way. It has devastated the regional forests with its "hoax" agreement and now it is implementing this. If the Government thinks it can convince the bush in relation to this matter, it has another think coming. We will support those people through thick and thin.

Time expired.
