



Speech by

VAUGHAN JOHNSON

MEMBER FOR GREGORY

Hansard 3 December 1999

FORESTRY AMENDMENT BILL

Mr JOHNSON (Gregory—NPA) (12.39 p.m.): This afternoon I wish to put on record my opposition to the Forestry Amendment Bill. In speaking to this issue, the Leader of the Opposition referred to the people factor. This Government came to power on a platform of consultation. It boasted that that was one of the most important words in its vocabulary. However, under the Labor administration consultation is still dead and buried. We all saw how much consultation took place during the six years of the Goss Government. There was not much consultation at all. We saw what happened in relation to the railway lines. People were opposed to that. We saw what happened with respect to the south coast motorway. People were opposed to it, too.

Mr Cooper: This Government's scorched earth policy.

Mr JOHNSON: The honourable member is dead right. The Government should remember that people are able to communicate—something that this Government is not doing enough of. It is not acknowledging the concerns of the timber industry.

In 1991 we witnessed the debacle of the closure of the Ravenshoe mill in north Queensland. Forty-eight jobs were lost when the Government decided to close down the timber industry in north Queensland so that its forests could be put on the World Heritage List. Importantly, in the light of that experience, we know that the business people in the towns also suffer. As the Leader of the Opposition said, it was the people in those towns who ran businesses, and who had a lifetime commitment to them, who suffered. I was only new to the Parliament when that happened about nine years ago. The timber workers in that area—and some of those blokes were third and fourth generation timber cutters—made the point that this was the third time in the history of white settlement that the forests in that part of the world had been harvested. In other words, the forests had been harvested, replenished, harvested, replenished, and harvested again. That industry was closed down.

This Government should remember that the people who derive a living from the land, be they graziers in western Queensland, farmers in central Queensland or the downs, be they miners, horticulturalists or timber workers, are responsible people. They are conservationists and environmentalists. If they were not upholding those traditions, they would not have survived for 150 years in this country. They care about their land, their communities, their families, the wider community and job creation.

Today we saw this debacle of an Attorney-General picking on Mike Horan and me over our stand on the size of electorates and the fair and equitable representation of the people of this State. Sadly, the Attorney-General and other Government members do not understand the big picture when it comes to rural and remote Queensland. We saw what happened at Ravenshoe. How many Government members have been to Ravenshoe since its timber industry closed down?

Mr Pitt: I have.

Mr JOHNSON: I have no doubt that the honourable member for Mulgrave has.

Mr Cooper: No activity there. It's shut down.

Mr JOHNSON: It is dead.

I will now quote from a magazine article which states—

"Grand conspiracies make interesting conversation, but at grass-roots level it's small-business economics which has people worried in Ravenshoe."

Honourable members interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr D'Arcy): Order! I am trying to listen to the member for Gregory.

Mr JOHNSON: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The article continues—

"Bill Manning's engineering workshop trading figures dropped \$6000 in the first three months after the World Heritage listing was announced."

It will not be any different for some of the businesses and towns in south-east Queensland. I cite places in the electorates of the honourable members for Crows Nest and Callide.

Mr Cooper: Esk.

Mr JOHNSON: All of those places—Esk, Theodore, Moura and elsewhere. The position of those businesses will be no different from that of Mr Manning's engineering workshop in Ravenshoe. What would be the major business of an engineering workshop in those areas? It would probably be making blades and doing heavy engineering type work for sawmills. Those businesses are reliant on sawmills. This Government is not looking at the big picture.

Do honourable members remember Graham Richardson? Was he at the Labor Party's function at South Bank last night? Did he write the policy that is being introduced today? Honourable members should listen to this. The magazine article continues—

" 'Richardson said his government would help establish a tourist industry in Ravenshoe ... but 90 percent of all visitors come here to look through the sawmill ...' "

Why do they go there? To look at the majestic timber that was milled by those blokes, as I said, for three generations. The effects of the South East Queensland Regional Forest Agreement will be no different from the effects that World Heritage listing had on that part of Queensland.

This Government came to power on a platform of 5% unemployment. All honourable members on this side of the House support the Government in its objective. We want to see unemployment reduced to 5%. All this Government is doing is expediting the process, and we will see unemployment pushed up to 10%. Currently, unemployment is 8.7%. And it is not only unemployment that will go up as a result of this agreement; bankruptcies will also go up. We have seen what is happening in the South Burnett.

When I was the Minister for Transport and Main Roads, we put in place a joint venture operation between Boral and five or six south-east corner local authorities to create work and employment opportunities for council employees. That initiative was designed to create employment and help to alleviate the problems associated with the drought that has been experienced there for about 10 years. But what will this agreement do? It will expedite the process whereby that part of Queensland will be closed down.

Sadly, this all comes back to consultation. There has been no proper consultation. I feel for the Minister for Primary Industries. I know he is a man of integrity and great honesty. However, he has to take a harder stand when it comes to the Deputy Premier, Jim Elder, and these negotiations, which were carried out by the AWU. And I know that the Minister is a member of the AWU faction. This is an unfortunate situation. It is a game. It is absolute evidence that it is bowing to the minority—the minority groups again. It is about time that the Government made those hard decisions of looking after the majority. Yes, I know there are minority groups that have to be looked after. The Government was talking in this Parliament last Friday week about minority groups. We come back here and again yesterday, the day before and much of this morning we have been talking about a minority issue. I know it is a controversial one, but at the end of the day I believe there are more important things that this Government should be making decisions about rather than some of those issues that are just there to prop up the social programs of a Socialist Labor administration. I have to say to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, I know what a successful man you are in your own right. The point I make is that there are people on that side of the House— not too many of them—who are business people, unfortunately.

Mr Seeney: Union clones!

Mr JOHNSON: Union clones, as the honourable member for Callide said. It is about time—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr D'Arcy): Order! I think the language is colourful enough. The member should get on with his speech.

Mr JOHNSON: Are you saying, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I am being too colourful? If you really want me to start up, I will start up.

The Bush is the name of this little document I am quoting from. It was put in place in north Queensland. I just want to read the last paragraph. It states—

"As we drive out of Ravenshoe, one last sign catches my eye: 'Devastation of rainforest a fallacy; devastation of people, a fact.' "

That is exactly and precisely what we are going to witness again in relation to this. This is a situation that we cannot take lightly. How do we know that this is not going to be a continuation of other timber milling areas in the further west of the State? I know of the decision that the Minister for Primary Industries made in relation to the cypress industry, and I applaud him for that. But again, these people are conservationists; they are very, very professional in their field and they care about their forests.

I was out in Chinchilla recently with the local member. Those people who are milling cypress pine in the Condamine area are gravely concerned about the infestation of the mother of millions plant. It is certainly a pest out there; it is a problem and it is going to go right through those forest areas. Again, all these noxious weeds and plants go against what this industry is about. This is proof of just how much these people care about the environment they are working in, the industry they are working in, the job creation they are involved in and, at the end of day, the businesses that are created in these places as a result of investment by these milling companies. We have seen exactly and precisely what has happened with Boral in relation to the RFA agreement. Where is Boral going to go? It is going to Tasmania. Tasmania is going to be—

Mr Cooper: All that good Queensland money is going to be spent in Tasmania.

Mr JOHNSON: Absolutely! As the honourable member for Crows Nest said, all that good Queensland money, all that good Queensland expertise, is lost to this State.

Mr Littleproud: And the jobs.

Mr JOHNSON: The jobs? They have gone; they are history. They have not even gone to heaven.

Mr Cooper interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! I was not suggesting before that the honourable member for Gregory was that colourful, but some of his language is.

Mr JOHNSON: I do not know what I have said.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: I do not want to repeat it. I think Hansard would appreciate it if the member did watch his language.

Mr JOHNSON: They are nodding in agreement up there.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: I think they are nodding in agreement with me. Let us get on with the meat of the speech.

Mr JOHNSON: The one thing that we have to remember, as the honourable member for Western Downs has just alluded to, is the people factor. I have touched on the people factor. There is one bloke up at Ravenshoe who says that at 55 he is too old to relocate and start again. So he is caught on the downhill slide. This is a situation that we have to take account of. When we come back to job creation and preservation of jobs, we have to think of these people. These blokes in their fifties have another 10 or 15 years in them before they retire. Many of them still have to provide for their families and some of them are still paying off mortgages.

As I said a while ago in relation to the south-east Burnett country, everybody on that side of the House knows exactly and precisely how devastated the people there have been over the past 10 to 15 years because of an ongoing drought that is further compounded by low commodity prices for beef and not being able to put in crops. We know what happened at the Murgon meatworks: some 600 jobs have been lost as a result of the inevitable closure of that meatworks. The point I make again is in relation to the taxing of these areas where these people for so long have been able to derive a living by being responsible and understanding and by caring about the area they live in.

It was the former Labor Prime Minister of this country who, back in the early seventies, started this downhill slide: Gough Whitlam.

Mr Littleproud: Not Gough!

Mr JOHNSON: I bet he was at their function last night, was he?

Mr Fenlon: He was there last night.

Mr JOHNSON: I bet they had him on centre stage, too. He said that we do not need to grow anything in Australia; we can import it all. What are we going to do? We are going to close down all the farming industries and we are going to import it all! What happens to the farmers? What happens to the people who work in those industries? The AWU faction here today will go back to the shearing industry in western Queensland, which we know is on its knees. What do all its members think of this type of policy?

I return to the legislation again. Where is a lot of this timber going to be imported from now? Yes, probably Malaysia or somewhere up in south-east Asia.

Mr Cooper: That is where they are clear felling up there.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! I know the honourable member is being rather provocative, but he should be heard in silence.

Mr JOHNSON: I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for your protection because I am a person who needs protection. Yes, what a fitting time it is to speak on the anniversary of 10 years of Labor coming to power.

Mr Cooper: Ten years of destruction!

Mr JOHNSON: As the honourable member for Crows Nest just said, 10 years of destruction. We saw what underlined the first six years of the administration and thank the good Lord that we had two and a quarter years of conservative administration to turn it around and put in place some high-powered infrastructure developments to get creation of jobs going again. Now we have come back to the same. We saw what happened at Ravenshoe; we saw what happened at Fraser Island—the promises that were made there. I have a document full of lies and untruths told by Ros Kelly and Graham Richardson—the absolute fabricators of the truth. It is documented here, if members opposite want to see it. We know their track record. They broke the country. Thank God we have a conservative Government in Canberra that is turning that around. Thank God one came into power in Queensland for two and a quarter years to turn it around here.

The one thing that I want to emphasise before I close in three minutes' time is that it is absolutely paramount that the Minister recognises the importance of those milling projects that he put in place in western Queensland. It is absolutely paramount that he keep it away from this erosive policy that he has in relation to south-east RFA. He is closing down viable, profitable businesses that are creating development and creating jobs.

Mr Cooper: It's been there for 150 years and they're just going to wipe it out.

Mr JOHNSON: Absolutely, 150 years! Are we going to see a mass of that go through the cypress industry or the softwood industry or somewhere else? The Government gives its ear to the minority groups that come to it all the time. This is certainly not beneficial to the people of this State. It is not productive to this State. I say to the Deputy Premier that he should show some better leadership in relation to some of these decisions, rather than what he has shown today.

The other thing that we have to recognise—and it has not been highlighted at all—is the importance of the younger generations in these areas who rely on following in their dad's footsteps in the timber industry.

Mr Cooper: Follow proudly in their footsteps.

Mr JOHNSON: Follow proudly, as the honourable member for Crows Nest said.

That brings me back to that 5% unemployment target. Not everybody wants to be an academic, a doctor, a lawyer or a school teacher. There are people out there who want to be labourers and do the physical work, and we need those people. That is paramount to the ongoing viability of the country in which we live.

My colleague reminded me of that again this morning. The member for Southport, Mick Veivers said to me, "Vaughan, again it highly emphasises just who represents the worker." It is the members on this side of the House—the coalition—who represent the workers in this State. The Government has sold them out time and time again. It sold them out at Ravenshoe, at Hervey Bay, in the railway workshops in Townsville, and now it is selling them out at Cooroy, Esk, Crows Nest and all the other places in between. It is a bit like what some people said in relation to the prostitution debate: the people are going to remind this Government when it comes to the next election exactly and precisely how it sold them out.

Time expired.
