



Speech by

Hon. V. LESTER

MEMBER FOR KEPPEL

Hansard 9 December 1999

VEGETATION MANAGEMENT BILL

Hon. V. P. LESTER (Keppel—NPA) (11.37 p.m.): Today marks one of the darkest days in the history of Queensland and of this Parliament. In recent days, we have witnessed one of the most blatant attacks on the democratic process as the Beattie Labor Government has used its majority to gag debate on a series of important pieces of legislation.

Earlier in the day we debated a Bill dealing with water—a very important issue for country people. That Bill was gagged. It is very shameful to have to go back to our constituents in the country and tell them that, on the very important issue of water, we were unable to put our points across in relation to the clauses because we were unceremoniously gagged.

I refer also to what has been happening in recent times with regard to amendments being brought into the House at the last minute. We have had little time to study the total ramifications of all of those amendments, particularly when so many other amendments are consequential. We could see further difficulties down the track because obviously these amendments were not properly studied in the first place.

To cover its own inadequacies, its own dismal performance, its lack of organisation and its lack of openness and transparency—contrary to the commitments given to the member for Nicklin—the Beattie Government has come into this House and sought to avoid the scrutiny it so definitely deserves. The Government made a promise and has now gone outside that promise.

The Vegetation Management Bill is an extremely important Bill and it needs time for consideration and lead-up. There has been some time in the lead-up, but not everything had been agreed upon—far from it—and the legislation has been rushed into this House without having been properly thought out. There has been no consideration given to the consequences which might follow. In 25 years as a member of the Legislative Assembly, I cannot recall witnessing such a contemptuous performance as that which we are witnessing here tonight, and in recent days, from the Beattie Labor Government.

To apply the gag to 10 other pieces of legislation was bad enough. That showed contempt not only for the parliamentary process but also for all of those people who had an interest in that legislation and who approached the Opposition members to have their concerns raised in this place. Unfortunately, we will have to tell our constituents that we could not raise all of their concerns. The Government has indeed stifled parliamentary debate. However, as a Government, it has also stifled community input into the parliamentary process that underpins our democratic processes. Now, for the Government to introduce legislation so significant, so wide ranging and with so many implications such as the Vegetation Management Bill, it has scaled new heights in its contempt for rural and regional Queensland.

Indeed, the Bill was released to the stakeholders and introduced to the House only yesterday. From our understanding, it was to be supported comprehensively by a prescriptive policy under which regional frameworks would be worked out. We do not have that. We have not had time to assess the full implications of this Bill, nor has rural industry. I have to say that, quite frankly, we do not really know what we are voting on, because we do not have the finer details.

Mr Hobbs: It's a bit like buying a motor car sight unseen.

Mr LESTER: Very definitely. If we buy a new motor car sight unseen, it might be all right, but here, we do not quite know what we are buying. We do not know whether we are buying a model T Ford, a new Buick or something that we cannot afford. It is a pretty poor state of affairs.

We have not been provided with a copy of the State policy. Despite being promised it yesterday, by this afternoon rural industry still had not been provided with that policy. So we do not have the policy, but we are passing a Bill. For goodness' sake, what an outrage! We are being asked to vote on one of the most significant Bills this decade, yet we have not had adequate time to consider it and have not been provided with all the information. Honestly, I cannot believe that we would be given this Bill here and not be given the policy. It is just absurd. This is nothing but pure political treachery. It is treason of the highest order. On that basis, the Beattie Government cannot hope to win the Opposition's support for this Bill, nor has it won that support.

Since the Beattie Government came to office 18 months ago, rural and regional Queensland has suffered at the hands of Labor's Left Wing ideology and preference for spin doctoring and emotion over—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr D'Arcy): Order! The honourable member says that he has been here 25 years. I am well aware of that fact. He should be able to speak to the Bill in the second-reading debate. I would appreciate it if he did so and stopped sledging.

Mr LESTER: Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank you for that. I do not accept the word "sledging"; I am purely stating fact.

Already, we have witnessed Labor sell out south-east Queensland's native hardwood industry; the 1,500 workers who depend directly on that industry for their jobs; the thousands of others who support that industry; the graziers, the beekeepers and other industries who depend on the forests; the recreational users; the rural and regional communities who depend on forest industries for employment, income, rates and services; and the economy of this State. Labor sold out that industry and it is set to close it down in exchange for a handful of green preferences at election time. The timber industry was dragged with a gun to its head to accept Labor's terms or be closed down overnight. The rest of the stakeholders and the community were completely shut out.

So much for consultation! So much for open and accountable Government! We witnessed the Treasurer—the gambler who, unlike Kenny Rogers, does not know when to fold them or when to hold them—make scurrilous and absolutely baseless allegations that farmers' wives would take the farm truck to town to do the shopping so as to rip off the diesel fuel rebate. We witnessed the Natural Resources Minister make similar, scurrilous, totally untrue allegations—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr D'Arcy): Order! I have called the honourable member to task once on the subject. The Bill is specific.

Mr LESTER: I would like to suggest very, very much indeed that the campaign started with the Minister for Natural Resources giving selected metropolitan media private briefings on land clearing so as to mount a jaundiced and inaccurate account of land management in this State. That campaign continued with the selected leaking of more jaundiced accounts of the land management practices employed by hardworking primary producers. That campaign culminated in the Premier's infamous policy-making plane trip to Charters Towers, where he made the grand assessment that the State was on fire as a result of so-called panic clearing.

Indeed, that was policy making from the comfort of a leather chair in the Government jet 40,000 feet off the ground. The Premier, under the illusion that he has to claim how good he believes he is, was apparently so good that he thought that, from 40,000 feet up in the clouds, he could differentiate between bushfires, maintenance fires, the burning of pulled timber, panic clearing and properly planned clearing. He even claimed to be able to differentiate between freehold and leasehold land. The Premier does not seem to know that the use of fire as a land management tool was around hundreds of years before white settlement. Aborigines used fire for many of the same reasons as graziers do now. The Premier does not seem to know that, at this time of the year, it is standard management practice for graziers to burn off the dead and matted pasture to allow the regeneration of new growth in the wet season. The Premier does not seem to know that, in terms of those fires that may have been related to clearing, farmers have to allow the timber to dry before they can burn it. The Premier does not seem to know that, of those fires that may have been related to clearing, most of that clearing would have been done at least two years ago under permits issued by the State Government. Those profound observations from the Premier—and I will not say "Biggles"—removed the little credibility that his Government may ever have had.

The Premier's comments, which were extremely inaccurate, were made to really fire up the people of Queensland. If one flies from Charters Towers towards Moranbah or Clermont, one would see that those places where some of those fires were reported to have occurred—properties such as Bulliwallah and so on—are either pastoral lease or leasehold. They are not freehold at all. That is the amazing thing about this whole issue. The Premier's carry-on made great headlines. However, most of

the properties involved were leasehold upon which there are Government guidelines. Those properties were most likely burning off, because that is what happens at this time of the year at Bulliwallah and some of those other stations.

It is obvious that the premise of this Bill is not based on science and it is not based on fact; it is based on emotive scaremongering and policy on the run. In his second-reading speech, the Minister referred to the actions of the ill-fated Goss Labor Government in relation to tree-clearing restrictions on leasehold land. The Minister seems to have forgotten the appalling mismanagement of that issue by his Labor predecessors; he seems to have forgotten the ensuing rural revolt; and he seems to have forgotten the street protest outside the Cabinet meeting held in Emerald. It may be news to the Minister, but primary producers have not forgotten. They will not forget the latest and most dramatic assault on their right to earn a living from their own land and to manage it according to sound practices.

One has to pay a lot of money to buy freehold land. A freehold title means that it is one's land entirely to do with as one wishes, responsibly. People who pay hundreds of thousands of dollars for the privilege of doing with the land as they wish do just that: they act responsibly. If they did not, it would devalue their land. It would not be worth as much. They will look after the land as best they possibly can. I have visited many freehold properties and it has been my experience that the land is treated with care and pride. That is something to behold. Of course, now land-holders will have a rope put around their necks. They will not be able to clear their land as they wish in order to increase their income. I have a problem if people have purchased property knowing that additional land had to be cleared but they now find that they might not be able to do that. In other words, with a stroke of the Government's pen, they have lost money.

The coalition has not forgotten that the Bill represents an attack on the principles of land ownership that have underpinned the State for decades. The Bill totally disregards the fact that freehold tenure is the most secure tenure available. It ignores the fact that land-holders have paid a premium for that tenure and, in doing so, have bought absolute ownership of that land, including the vegetation that grows on it. It ignores the fact that freehold title holders have a right to manage their own land and to conduct agricultural activities as they see fit. It ignores the fact that the vast and overwhelming majority of land-holders are not in the business of destroying the land because they depend upon it for their livelihoods and the livelihoods of their children, their grandchildren, their great grandchildren and all those who will come after them.

This Bill is based on the grossly inaccurate and arrogant belief of the Labor Party that land-holders need to be told what is good for them. It is based on the belief that they need the Government and the bureaucracy to impose punitive and proscriptive laws to direct how they manage their land and conduct their businesses. I can see a time coming when lots of public servants will have to inspect properties. People will make applications to them, and it will depend upon the individual public servant whether those applications will be processed. There will be considerable time delays. Knowing the way that red tape can gather, the process will go on and on. The people will lose heart. I have no doubt that many people will walk off their properties as a result of what is in store for them.

The Bill is based on the premise that only the Government can manage land responsibly. That is laughable from the Beattie Government's atrocious record of environmental management.

I wonder what is going on. When the Transport Department was building a trailer park in the Rosslyn Bay—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr D'Arcy): Order! Again I ask the member to address the Bill. He has been doing very well and he will continue to do so.

Mr LESTER: I asked with all due respect for three native Norfolk pine trees to be left on site. They were on a mound and could have been shifted. They smashed them down. That was a dreadful thing. I mention it in this debate, because while one department is doing one thing another department legislates in a different way. I will return to the Bill, but I had to make that point.

The Government cannot manage properly the land it already owns, but it continues to buy up more national parks and lock up more forests. The Government has presided over an explosion of weeds and feral animals in our national parks. This Government has handed down one of the worst environmental budgets ever, with \$28.4m cut from this year's Environmental Protection Agency budget alone.

The Bill represents an expectation that rural Queensland and our primary producers are once again expected to shoulder the burden of the environmental demands of urban populations and, indeed, a city-centred Beattie Government. This is a divisive Bill and the Beattie Government's handling of this issue has been divisive. It has been malicious and destructive. Far from being the Government for all Queenslanders, the Premier and his Government have sought to drive a wedge between the city and the bush. The Bill clearly splits the treatment of rural land from urban development. It allows widespread tree clearing on Crown and private land in urban areas for roads, housing developments and shopping centres to go on virtually unchecked, even though that might be good sugar land,

strawberry land or whatever, while primary producers who own freehold land will be subjected to onerous and proscriptive restrictions.

The Beattie Government has talked often of the need for primary producers to operate under certainty. However, it confuses certainty with the dead hand of regulation. With the hysteria and the emotion that has been whipped up by the Beattie Government in its campaign to introduce these new laws, science has been ignored and all the perspective has been lost.

Documentary evidence produced by respected ecologists such as Dr Bill Burrows and other records indicate that there are now more trees in the State than when Captain Cook sailed up the east coast.

Mr Mackenroth: Fair dinkum!

Mr LESTER: A learned person has suggested that, and it has come from research. That type of scientific advice has not been sought out when developing this Bill.

There are seven million hectares of woodlands in Queensland. Even based on the Minister's figures that some 340,000 hectares are being cleared annually, that figure is a mere fraction of the total number of trees in this State. There is no indication as to just how much of that 340,000 hectares is regrowth and how much is virgin timber. Even though we are debating the Bill, we are not sure what is what. The satellite data cannot determine the difference between regrowth and virgin timber. Even on those figures, the clearing rate represents just 0.005% of Queensland's woodlands. That gives one food for thought in no uncertain terms.

However, that has not stopped the Minister from misusing the figures and trying to paint a picture in the city that the farmers and graziers are clearing every tree in this State. The whole issue has been whipped up and overrated. I believe that it is all about making the bush people look bad, which helps votes in the city. I hate to say that, but I can only think that that is what is happening.

The Bill is based on the mistaken premise that Queensland is in the same situation as the southern States of Victoria, South Australia and New South Wales where all the trees have already been cleared and there is no regrowth problem. It ignores the fact that our climate is different; that our rain falls predominantly in the summer months; that our soil types are different and that clay subsoils in many areas will severely limit the sorts of salinity problems that we have seen develop interstate. But the Bill also ignores the necessity to manage vegetation and to control regrowth so as to maintain the viability of our rural lands. The Bill will have a massive economic and social impact on rural and regional Queensland. It will act as another means of stifling the development of regional and rural Queensland, which has already been stifled through this Beattie Government's freeze on water infrastructure developments. The Bill, with its prescriptive and onerous controls, will strangle the productivity of primary producers. That worries me terribly. These people will feel as though they are pulling a trailer behind them.
