



Speech by

Hon. V. LESTER

MEMBER FOR KEPPEL

Hansard 13 April 1999

FORESTRY INDUSTRY

Hon. V. P. LESTER (Keppel—NPA) (6 p.m.): I move—

"That this Parliament moves to promote the resource, conservation and heritage values of the south-east Queensland forest industry through the South-east Queensland Regional Forest Agreement by—

1. the continuation of a viable and sustainable timber industry, based on the native forest hardwood resource, with a gradual transition to hardwood plantations as that becomes available;
2. the retention of all existing jobs;
3. enhanced silvicultural practices and value adding;
4. ensuring a scientifically justifiable comprehensive, adequate and representative forest reserve system; and
5. the continued access to forest reserves by other associated industries and community groups."

This motion sets out the original intention of the scoping agreement for the regional forest agreements signed by Mr Borbidge, as Premier, and the Howard Government in 1997. It reinforces the terms of reference of the RFA which were endorsed by both the Federal Government and the former State Government: to allow the timber industry to continue to develop in an effective and internationally competitive manner; to make sure that our forests are managed in an ecologically sustainable way; and to ensure the provision of a comprehensive, adequate and representative forest reserve system.

The south-east Queensland timber industry is already worth \$70m and provides 1,036 jobs directly. That is not to mention the thousands of jobs that the industry supports in service industries and services in regional and metropolitan centres. That contribution to the State's economy has the potential to grow many times over through import replacement and value adding if—and only if—the Beattie Government provides the certainty and the security which is required to stimulate continued investment.

Have no doubt about that. If the Beattie Government allows the RFA process to be hijacked by the extreme environmental agenda being promoted by the Natural Resources Minister and his partner in crime, Dr Aila Keto, the investment needed to propel the timber industry into the future will dry up just as it is drying up in the mining industry. Similar to the mining industry, the timber industry is a wealth generator. If investment dries up, jobs will go, some regional towns will go and others will lose more services.

Due to the uncertainty created by this Government's mishandling of the RFA and its preference for grubby factional deals rather than strong Government which is serious about providing jobs that investment has already been checked. Only three weeks ago the Burnett Sawmill put its \$500,000 modernisation program on hold. The chief executive officer of the Burnett Sawmill, Colin Corpe, gave his reasons for that in the Bundaberg News-Mail of 23 March. He said—

"The State Government's position is a very real threat to our existence."

Local Australian Workers Union organiser, Damien Green, said—

"The same unrest existed in many towns in the Wide Bay-Burnett area."

Meanwhile, what was the Minister for State Development and Trade—the man who would be Premier, the man representing the workers of the AWU, and the man apparently responsible for the overall RFA process—doing to assure the Burnett Sawmill and those timberworkers that his Government was committed to their future? He was launching a \$68,000 ecotourism study for the forests which would at best, according to the Minister, provide 50 jobs! The Minister is talking about providing 50 jobs in areas that are probably unsustainable. This is shades of Fraser Island and Ravenshoe, perhaps, and cold comfort for the 44 timber workers at the Burnett Sawmill—not to mention the other 1,000 timberworkers in the south-east Queensland timber industry.

The workers reacted to the would-be Premier's announcement, according to the Bundaberg News-Mail of 23 March, as follows—

"The AWU and Burnett Sawmill management both scoffed at the State Government's latest idea of turning logging areas into eco-tourism areas. Mr Green said the Government was being held to ransom by environmentalists who predominantly lived in inner-city Brisbane."

Mr Green is dead right. The Beattie Government is being held to ransom by these groups through a shonky deal which traded timber industry jobs for Green preferences at the 1998 State election. That was exposed this morning with the release by the Opposition of a desperate email from Mr Charles Hamilton, convenor for the Australian Conservation Foundation on the Gold Coast, to departmental officers. Mr Hamilton urged them to write to the Premier, no less, to remind him of his promises and call for his Government—

"... to support an industry transition out of native forests and into plantations as required by Labor's biodiversity policy (a critical element in the conservation movement's support for Labor at the last State election)."

There we have it. No wonder the timber industry is nervous. It should be.

It is indicative of the division within the Beattie Government that it has created so much division and uncertainty on this issue. It is a jobs versus environment argument. The RFA process progressed by the previous Government was not about division; it was about balance—safeguarding jobs, developing the industry and providing a comprehensive and representative reserve system. It was only in March last year that the coalition Government signed Australia's first ever interim management agreement which was strongly endorsed by both the industry and the environmental movement.

Sadly, under this Government that cooperation has faltered as the Beattie Government has allowed itself to be dogged by factional brawling and shabby preference deals. The goals of the RFA should never have been under any threat. They provided a balanced and sensible policy for the management of Queensland's forests. The sad truth is that, despite the hard yards put in by the previous Government to deliver certainty to the timber industry, to safeguard the jobs of timberworkers and to provide a scientifically based representative forest reserve, the RFA process has careered off the rails since the Beattie Government took office.

Under this can't do Beattie Government the balanced approach which provided for a viable and sustainable timber industry and the preservation of the cultural and heritage values of our forests have been sacrificed to the factional fires of the Queensland Labor Party. In the nine months since the Beattie Government took office we have seen the RFA bog down as a bitter row emerges between the Natural Resources Minister's Socialist Left and the Deputy Premier's Australian Workers Union.

While the \$74m timber industry, the 1,036 timberworkers and the dozens of rural communities and small businesses that live off that industry sweat under the uncertainty created by this Government, the Beattie Government flounders around like a rudderless ship trying to work out who is running the RFA agenda. It is certainly not the Minister for Primary Industries. Is it the Deputy Premier? Is it the Minister for Natural Resources? Whilst Dr Aila Keto and the extreme Green movement have the Natural Resources Minister by the ear, the AWU is not sure that it has its man's, the Deputy Premier's, ear.

This is not a responsible Government. This is a Government riddled with a factional cancer. We saw how ridiculous the situation has become only a couple of weeks ago with the release of the comprehensive regional assessment report. This \$11m study and the social assessment report are supposed to be the templates for the RFA. Yet, despite the significance of these reports, the State Government did not even issue a media release to accompany the release of the study. Why? Because the faction-bound Ministers supposedly in charge of the RFA could not agree on the wording! What a farce! What an insult to Queenslanders! May I simply suggest that the motion I have moved tonight is sound, sensible and is going to provide jobs for our timber workers? It is the correct way to go.

Time expired.
