



Speech by

Hon. V. LESTER

MEMBER FOR KEPPEL

Hansard 25 May 1999

REGIONAL FOREST AGREEMENT

Hon. V. P. LESTER (Keppel—NPA) (5.56 p.m.): I move—

"That this House undertakes only to support a regional forest agreement based on an increase in jobs in the south-east Queensland hardwood timber industry through improved productivity, improved forest management and the development of hardwood plantations, with adequate financial support from the State and Commonwealth Governments."

Development of an acceptable regional forest agreement for the south-east Queensland native hardwood industry is a major test for the Premier. It is on three fronts and they all relate to jobs. The Premier has an opportunity not only to protect in excess of 1,100 direct jobs in 35 hard-pressed south-east Queensland centres; he also has an opportunity to grow, on industry estimates, a further 600 long-term sustainable jobs, or he can kill all these jobs and a number of towns. The second test concerns the Premier's sincerity, or lack thereof, in his declarations that the bush has suffered enough, that he is in touch, that he cares and that he is an astute post-One Nation politician. If he kills these jobs, clearly he is not. The bush will know that his wooing is just rhetoric.

The third is the decider. It is the same test that he is facing in relation to industrial relations. How does this Labor leader, with his particular history, deal with the AWU, which has close to a majority in the caucus and is led by his loyal deputy? How does he deal with the faction that very deliberately kept him out of Cabinet for so long? How does a limbo Labor leader deal with the Left, potentially the most destructive force in the caucus—the faction that vowed it would never let itself be done over again as it was during the Goss years? Does he go with the AWU—save the jobs—and outrage the Left or does he cave in to the Left and deepen the mistrust of the biggest faction in the caucus? Or does he forget the factions and do his job, as he should do, on behalf of all Queenslanders? This is really what he must do.

By the sort of RFA we get, we will see what the Premier is made of in relation to these issues. The signs at this point are dreadful. For a start, he desperately wants to disown the process. Can honourable members imagine this? He has even threatened to pull out of the process. He says that the RFA is a coalition plot. Of course, that is not true. The truth only matters to this Premier when it suits his purpose—we know his standards on these things—and when it does not suit him it is abandoned, barefaced. On this occasion, his abandonment of it is, even by his standards, unbelievably barefaced.

The truth about the RFA process is that it is explicitly part and parcel of a process laid down in the National Forest Policy Statement signed by Wayne Goss and Paul Keating in 1992. Anybody with a passing engagement of the issue knows that. As recently as the last election, the Premier supported the RFA process. He promised, in the forestry policy of the ALP, funding for RFAs in Queensland. Twelve months ago, the Premier backed the RFA. Today he dumps on it. The only possible interpretation is that he wants to duck responsibility for the outcome. That is what he wants to do, but he cannot. And the outcome will be his.

Indeed, we in the Opposition have not been conducting the negotiations with the Commonwealth. However, we did establish the parameters for the study which would generate the data on which the final decisions would be made. His choice, now that the material is out, is a very simple one. He can shut down the industry very quickly or he can, indeed, take thousands of jobs out of the south-east of the State and make the Left very happy. He has that choice. He can wipe whole towns off

the map—quickly or slowly—to satisfy the Left. Or he can not just save the industry but he can ensure that it grows in importance as a jobs generator in this State. To boot, he can go a long way towards ensuring a viable future for some 35 communities. He can do that while still respecting the other major aspect of the RFA process, which is to expand the comprehensive and representative reserve system by some 200,000 hectares.

The coalition made this outcome possible. In 1995, the then Labor Government could not get Paul Keating to recognise that Queensland could not meet the same targets in relation to protected forest areas as could some other States. Labor could not achieve that. The Cabinet of the day was told that if the State was forced to meet these targets, the hardwood timber industry in south-east Queensland would be devastated. On coming to Government, the then Premier was simply not prepared to accept that outcome. John Howard was not prepared to accept that outcome.

In the parameters that we agreed for the comprehensive regional assessment study, it was understood—it was specifically included in the agreement—that Queensland would not be able to meet that outcome on the basis of the social and economic dislocation that this would cause. The Commonwealth has since shown that it is looking for balanced outcomes—win-win outcomes for the timber industry and for the forests. The recent Western Australian RFA placed 150,000 more hectares into protected reserves without costing a job. The same result can be achieved here. The coalition says that it must be achieved here, and it can be achieved very readily.

Firstly, there must be sufficient funding from the State and Commonwealth Governments to enable enough investment by industry to maximise productivity and to generate new marketing opportunities. Secondly, there must be improved management of forests to ensure sustainable access to good quality timber. This involves the use of silviculture. Thirdly, there must be State, Commonwealth and private investment in a hardwood plantation industry so that, in 30 to 40 years' time, there can be a gradual transition from at least some forest areas. That makes sense. Fourthly, there must be a continued ability to access timber on private land.

I would expect such a program to cost more—potentially significantly more—than the \$20m so far jointly committed by the Commonwealth and the States over the 20 years of the RFA. I am not convinced that the cost would be as high as \$100m, as signalled by the Deputy Premier. However, I can assure him of bipartisan support for any well-developed proposal for a greater contribution from the Commonwealth based around the sustainable growth of the timber industry. However, I must say that, given the latest outbreak of factional infighting, I fear greatly for the hardwood timber industry in the State and for all those employed in it and all those communities which rely on it, because they are now pawns in an eternal Labor Party brawl.

This issue is not being dealt with on its merits. The Premier has decided not to do the AWU's bidding on aspects of his industrial relations platform. That was a courageous decision under the circumstances. It is just one example of how the efforts of the Premier, at every turn so far, have been to try to consolidate his credentials with the Left. He will be courageous indeed if he decides to kick the AWU again in a month or two, unless he really believes that both Bill and Jim are pussy cats. Perhaps they are.

In any event, it is a tragedy for the good governance of Queensland that a matter as important to so many people as the RFA process is being decided based on the Premier's fear of the Right and the Left. But that is quite simply the situation. Why we do not take the politics out of this issue and concentrate on what jobs are about is beyond me. After all, it is a disgraceful exhibition that we are witnessing at the current time. It is politics before people. It is survival; but again, it is survival of the wrong people. We want to see the survival of the people in the timber industry.

Time expired.
