



Speech by
**Hon. BRIAN
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MEMBER FOR WESTERN DOWNS

Hansard 7 September 2000

VEGETATION MANAGEMENT AMENDMENT BILL

Hon. B. G. LITTLEPROUD (Western Downs—NPA) (5.27 p.m.): I welcome the opportunity to speak to the Vegetation Management Amendment Bill. I want to place on record once again that this is the second time the legislation pertaining to this matter has come before the House. The first time around, debate on the Bill was guillotined, and we already know that there is limited time in which to debate this Bill. It has been guillotined again. This issue is very important to rural landowners across Queensland. The Government's actions speak volumes for its ignorance with regard to the wellbeing of people in inland Queensland.

Today will go down as a pretty black day for rural landowners across Queensland. We have seen all sorts of attacks on freehold property rights and water allocation rights. We will finalise two Bills in one day: the Water Bill and the Vegetation Management Amendment Bill. Neither of them provides for compensation. No economic impact reality has gone into the formulation of either of them. The Government is just trampling all over the rights of landowners—and, in this case, freehold landowners.

I want to suggest to the House that there is another way, and it has proven itself. I recall that, in the mid 1980s, soil conservation was a very serious issue across the agricultural belt of Queensland. There were all sorts of suggestions as to what should be done. There was good scientific work being done by the DPI, and the people in the farming industry themselves were doing their own research. It was not long before everyone was doing their own property development plan to implement soil conservation measures: contour banks, strip cropping, pasture strips and all those sorts of measures. But it became pretty obvious after a few years that if such measures were to be really effective, there had to be a whole-of-catchment plan for soil conservation. So it fell on the Bjelke-Petersen Government of the time to address the problem.

We argued in our party room about how we would go about it. We could have taken the sort of line that this Government has taken: complete arrogance and using the big heavy stick and coming over the top. On the other hand, we could have taken the advice of the farmers, who said, "You tell us what to do. We will do it voluntarily." That is the path we chose. I can still recall sitting in the committee room with Neil Turner as the Minister. We argued hard and long and came up with the suggestion that the only way to go about tackling the problem was to get the people educated as to how to approach whole-of-catchment management, go out and sell the policy, and those who did not fall in initially would soon see that they were being unfair to their neighbours. The reality is that, after 10 years, there is now catchment management all over the agricultural belt of Queensland, with all the people doing it voluntarily and getting some sort of assistance from the Federal Government.

So there is another way. Soil conservation was done by the National Party Government, and we did it perfectly. Had we still been in Government, we would have addressed this problem properly as well, in a spirit of cooperation. That is what the Agforce people were looking for. They have been to see the Minister and the Premier and they have said, "We can do it voluntarily. We know there are better, improved ways of doing it now." People have done the wrong thing in the past, but as they go about planting out their properties they take cognisance of all those things that can be done better and, given the flexibility of the management of their own properties, they are looking after their own assets and they will be prepared to do it. However, that has never been the case. There has been all sorts of filibustering by the Premier and all sorts of promises trying to push the Federal people into a corner, but

it has come back to haunt him. The chance was there, the offer was there, but the only party that could deliver it to the Agforce people was the National Party, because we believe in voluntary guidelines. The Agforce people, I think, would welcome a Government that would do that. The Bill before the House today tramples all over the rights of these people. There will be no guidelines; the Government will dominate.

The next thing that I fear is the process and the reality of these regional plans. I think that the Minister is having a bit of a grin because he has a trick up his sleeve, and that is that he knows that he is going to stop all clearing. There will be no more clearing across rural Queensland until such time as these plans are put into place and, as I understand it, the plans have to meet the demands of a Statewide code. It will take approximately two years for those regional plans to be put together because their formulation will necessitate all sorts of consultation at a regional level. Then each plan will be submitted back to the department or to the Minister. I can just imagine that the Minister, with a wry grin on his face, would find some fault with it and say, "Go back and redevelop that", and what should have taken two years could end up taking three or four years—and all the while nothing is going to happen.

So it would fall very nicely into the plan of the present Government. It would enable it to say, "We can stop tree clearing in any way whatsoever. We will have a fake front." There would be consultation going on and all these local plans being put together, but all the while the Minister has the chance to put the knife in and frustrate and delay and things will not get done. This will be to the Labor Government's advantage at the ballot box because people in the city will be told, "Oh, we have got all these plans implemented across Queensland. We know what is going on. We are in control of tree clearing", but nothing will be happening. So Labor will pick up the vote in the city, which is all it worries about, but it could not care less about the economic impact on the people in rural Queensland.

I put on record that that is my fear, that it will take at least two years to draw up all these plans. A lot of these people have already been flogging themselves to meetings all over the State trying to give some information to the Government that has already been ignored. They will not be in a very good mood to go back and do it all again. I can imagine how the Minister would get some sort of satisfaction out of, once again, being the person who will frustrate and hold up all these sorts of plans. We could get the situation where those people who currently are desperate to control some of the regrowth on their country may well find the guidelines as they apply to regrowth may make it impossible for them to go ahead.

As I understand it, when regrowth reaches more than 70% of the mature height of the trees around it, it is no longer considered to be regrowth. In the meantime, of course, while nothing is being done the productivity of properties is going down the hill. So I think that this Government is being rather devious in the sorts of things it is doing. It is showing no consideration whatsoever for the economic impact on those people who in many instances bought properties believing that if they could achieve their true capacity they would be able to repay the loans. There are also those people who converted leasehold land to freehold land by paying market price to the State Government to gain the freehold title to the land. Of course, they have been paying that money in but now the Government is taking their rights back off them. All those rights that went with freehold land have been taken back without any compensation and without rebating any of the money that has been paid in.

So it is not surprising that there is so much angst out there in the bush. Just imagine the feeling that will be out there in the next few years. Today the water rights of rural Queenslanders have been trampled, and now we have before us another piece of legislation that tries to fix up a piece of legislation that was guillotined through this place in December last year. There is still no compensation. There is a promise of all sort of plans, but really they are only plans to frustrate the whole process. If people in the agricultural belt had been given the chance to do it their own way—they are quite willing to cooperate—the problem would have been solved long ago.
