



Speech by

Dr DAVID WATSON

MEMBER FOR MOGGILL

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MINERAL RESOURCES AMENDMENT BILL

Dr WATSON (Moggill—LP) (Leader of the Liberal Party) (9.03 p.m.): The Liberal Party will not be supporting this Bill. We do not wish to compound a problem. We do not wish to place a further barrier on investment in the mining sector in Queensland.

We agree with the Opposition Leader on the evolution of this mess relating to the right to negotiate. It has been a disaster for development in this country. It has been a disaster for Aborigines, and it will continue to be a disaster, given the failure of the Premier to gain the support of his own party in Canberra for what he has proposed in his State-based regime. I thought it was pretty interesting at the time that the Premier tried to claim some kind of credit for a big win in Canberra. However, I think that was blown apart in Laurie Oakes' article on page 22 of the Bulletin magazine of 12 September 2000 in which he said—

"Let's cut through the nonsense. Kim Beazley had a win in the deal he negotiated with Queensland Premier Peter Beattie over native title."

He went on to say that Kim Beazley warned the Premier that there would be no way that Federal Labor would pass it. In that article he quotes Kim Beazley. It states—

" 'I'm not moving and the situation won't change in Caucus,' Beazley warned in another discussion with Beattie in Hobart in early August. Hoping Beazley would eventually crack rather than risk an electorally damaging brawl with a state Labor government, Beattie waited until the last moment to give in. But give in he did, in a telephone conversation with the federal opposition leader at 8am on the day the issue was due to come to a vote in the Upper House."

So the Premier had to change his approach to comply with Labor Party policy. He was saved from complete humiliation only by the fact that Mr Melham decided to resign. For a short period it looked like the Premier had a bit of a win.

Laurie Oakes summed up the situation at the conclusion of his article when he stated—

"Just because Beazley did not stand over Beattie for the count last week and then swagger around the ring in triumph does not make him a wimp or a loser."

It is the attitude of Federal Labor and the inability of the Premier to negotiate a reasonable position for Queensland that makes native title in this State a disaster.

We acknowledge the need for equality between the rights of Aborigines and the rights of other titleholders when their property rights are mutually affected by mining. The commonsense goal of enabling equality before the law was fundamental to the development by the Prime Minister of the Wik package. However, the problem for us in supporting the Bill proposed by the member for Gladstone is simply this: the High Court recognised indigenous rights at common law. Thus, by definition, the non-indigenous land-holder does not have that native title right. We believe the threshold of rights should not be the level of the right to negotiate but the level of the rights that apply to all other land-holders in this country. I think the member for Callide actually explained the sentiments of that earlier on in his speech. It is our view that to give the leaseholders the same rights as the greater rights that apply under the right to negotiate would simply compound the problems facing the mining industry in this State.

The right to negotiate process has already created a mammoth backlog. In Western Australia there is a backlog of 12,000 mining titles. In Queensland the backlog is a depressing 1,981 mining titles. Since 1997 expenditure on exploration has fallen from \$180m a year to below \$90m a year. That drop is costing us jobs. That drop is costing us credibility.

We cannot support a Bill which would deliberately impose further administrative and economic burdens on the mining sector. We cannot support a Bill which may very well cause mining companies to throw up their hands and say, "It's all too hard. Let's take our investment overseas." One has only to look at the investments of some of Australia's leading mining companies, including some of Queensland's leading mining companies, to see that that process has already started in a fairly significant way. Many mining companies in Queensland now invest more overseas than they do in Australia and definitely more overseas than they do in Queensland. The continuing disaster which this issue has given rise to will continue to push that investment overseas even more.

I look forward to actually working with the Leader of the National Party when we are in Government to establish a native title regime in Queensland that gives due consideration to the legitimate aspirations of Aboriginal people, has due regard to the right of equality before the law for leaseholders in a sensible format and that finally delivers, out of the mess created by Labor, a fair and workable regime for Aborigines, for the Government, for the taxpayers of Queensland and for the mining industry.
