



Speech by

**Mrs D. PRATT**

**MEMBER FOR BARAMBAH**

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Hansard 1 March 2000

**VEGETATION MANAGEMENT LEGISLATION**

**Mrs PRATT** (Barambah—IND) (6 p.m.): I move—

"That this House recognises the concerns and growing protests of land-holders in relation to the Vegetation Management Bill and pledges this day to undertake the following—

- (a) rescind the Bill known as the Vegetation Management Bill 1999  
and
- (b) enter into meaningful consultation with land-holders to achieve a Vegetation Management Bill which will achieve the aims of both Government and land-holders."

I rise tonight to ask the members of this Government to be big enough to admit that they have made the error of making too much haste in promoting, tabling and forcing the Vegetation Management Bill through Parliament without proper and due consultation with the very people on whom this legislation will have the ultimate and perhaps the most devastating of consequences. There is no-one who does not believe that the issue concerning vegetation management should not be addressed. There would also be no-one who would not encourage the conservation and management of one of our most precious resources. There is not a farmer, a grazier or a miller who does not understand the necessity of conservation.

Let us walk briefly down memory lane. It will be a brief trip as there is little time for the whole scenario to be played out. On a Sunday Mr Beattie flew to Charters Towers to attend a Community Cabinet meeting. On the way, he noticed the smoke of many lit fires. With that observation came the flippant statement from Mr Beattie that the State was on fire from one end to the other. There are many reasons as to why there would have been fires lit at that time of year. Due to the late arrival of spring, many areas did not burn off until later in the year, as happened around Barambah. Burning off in Australia is an annual event to protect areas and forests from the ravages of bushfires. We are all very familiar with the effects of wildfires. There are many other reasons to burn off as well, but it is not necessary to go into them all.

Mr Beattie was quoted as saying, "We don't need what is clearly panic clearing going on." Mr Beattie is also reported as having said at the time that we would have a resolution to the land-clearing issue before Christmas. Mr Beattie's flights were on Sunday and Monday. By Wednesday there was legislation on the table of the House and by Friday it was forced through the Parliament with very little debate. What on earth happened to consultation? Mr Beattie says that tree-clearing rates are increasing. A very interesting statistic and one that the Premier uses regularly to justify this legislation is that there was a significant change in the satellite data concerning tree clearing. Clearing on freehold land rose from 44% of the total in 1991-95 to 57% of the total in 1995-97. Why did this occur? The answer is simple.

Interim guidelines were established for leasehold land in 1995 and the Goss Government then started rattling the sabres in that year on controls on freehold. So there it is: increased clearing began from the time the Goss Government first mooted action on freehold land. The Goss Government was the stimulus back then, and the Beattie Government has been the stimulus this time. What we have is a Government-induced outbreak of panic clearing. That is not the fault of industry; it is the fault of Government. This legislation did exactly what Mr Beattie's Government was hoping to prevent, that is, it caused people to panic. With a little consideration and consultation and less knee-jerk reaction, this

Government would have all the land-holders willing and eager to assist them in coming to a reasonable and responsible long-term solution to a problem which needs resolving in the best interests of all parties, including the parties whose livelihood and future relies so much on the preservation of the very vegetation that this Government seeks to protect. Both sides are trying to achieve the same result.

Let us be realistic: in all industries there are what are commonly called a few cowboys. To describe all graziers and farmers as environmentally irresponsible is insulting. These people may not have a degree and they may not be able to write a book about conservation and vegetation management, but they do know what it is and they actively pursue it. Everyone admits that the practices of our forefathers were detrimental to the environment. The majority of land-holders are now actively pursuing conservation techniques.

Because this legislation has been put together by people who theorise about rural Queensland but do not live, work and breathe it, the mistrust of rural Queenslanders for those in Government and their advisers is almost tangible at this time. The land we are talking about is freehold land. I will talk a little about freehold land, or fee simple land. In the judgment of Justice Isaacs, at page 42, he quotes from page 218 of Challis's Real Property, 3rd Edition. That textbook states—

"... a fee simple is the most extensive in quantum, and the most absolute in respect to the rights which it confers, of all the estates known to law. It confers, and since the beginning of legal history it always has conferred, the lawful right to exercise over, upon and in respect to the land every act of ownership which can enter into the imagination."

This vegetation legislation aims to take away many of the freedoms stated in that book. I have to ask myself: why were these land-holders not consulted in depth? Why did they not get the chance to work with this Government to arrive at a reasonable outcome, an outcome that all the landowners who have called me from all corners of the State have said they are prepared to work towards, even to the point of coming up with plans to aid in achieving the goal of this Government?

Mr Beattie has endeavoured to obtain some compensation from the Federal Government, stating that land-holders would not get proper compensation if Mr Howard did not come through with \$100m. It was stated that the State Government could not fund it by itself. But it can waste \$280m of taxpayers' money, much of which would have come from land-holders, to build a superstadium in Brisbane. Surely if the Minister and the Premier believe that it is essential to pass this vegetation management legislation with such urgency and with no real consultation, then it would seem reasonable to take that \$280m from a non-essential use and put it to an essential one. Instead, what is proposed is that we accept bits and pieces of legislation that was rammed through this House. There are some good provisions in this Bill, and many people have stated the same to me. That good can be easily incorporated in the drafting of a new Bill to address this problem.

The Federal Government has asked that this vegetation legislation be revisited. Agforce spokesman Mr Larry Acton has asked that this legislation be revisited. The land-holders have asked that this legislation be revisited. Many members of this House have constantly asked that it be revisited. The only party involved in this process that has not demonstrated a willingness to revisit this legislation is this Beattie Government. This Government, which so desperately wants the legislation to work, is the only party that will not even consider it. We are asking the Government tonight to please do so. I can understand Mr Beattie thinking that this is just another stunt, just another ploy for political gain. I say this to the Premier: do not judge us all by the standards adopted by many seasoned members of this House, some of whom would be masters after so long. I moved this motion tonight because I see what is happening. I hear what the land-holders are saying. They need the Government to understand that there is more to this than political mileage. It is about people and livelihoods.

I ask this of the Premier, the Minister for Environment and Heritage and Minister for Natural Resources and the Labor Government: in the pursuit of fair and equitable government for all Queenslanders, will the Government rescind the current vegetation Bill and undertake to have discussions and consultation with all the various parties to come to a realistic and workable agreement? Mr Beattie stands before us daily in this House and states that this Government is out there listening to the people of Queensland. How is it, then, that the statement I constantly hear is that members of this Government are out there, but that if they are listening they had better clean the wax out of their ears because they are not hearing, and they had better open their minds because they are not understanding. Will the Premier pledge to Queensland land-holders that the Government will meet them halfway in working to resolve an issue that is vital to all Queenslanders? I ask the Premier and this Government to be what they promised to be when Mr Beattie became Premier, that is, in the Premier's own words, "a Government for all Queenslanders".

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