



## Speech by

**Mr DOUG SLACK**

**MEMBER FOR BURNETT**

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Hansard 7 September 2000

### **VEGETATION MANAGEMENT AMENDMENT BILL**

**Mr SLACK** (Burnett—NPA) (4.32 p.m.): I note that the Attorney-General and Minister for Justice declared a pecuniary interest in the Water Bill. In light of that, although I believe that my pecuniary interest in relation to this legislation before the House is an interest in common, as members would realise I hold a considerable amount of land with my family and I declare a pecuniary interest in respect of the tree-clearing legislation. Obviously, in holding that land, my family has been involved in tree clearing on that land. I approach this debate on that basis. I have a fairly extensive knowledge of rural industry, particularly the cattle industry, and my family has held land for many generations. In some quarters it is believed that my family were the first family to run cattle on the south side of the Brisbane River, so my family has had some experience.

I must admit that, at the time the tree-clearing laws for leasehold land were introduced, I was a little bit apprehensive about their implications, particularly in relation to having to get a permit, the time involved in that and the restrictions that would come from it. Having said that and implemented the requirements of the tree-clearing permits in relation to leasehold land, I can say that, in general, if the laws are implemented properly, they protect the land, they protect the environment and they are of benefit to cattle people. I admit that, and many other cattle people recognise that. An increasing number of those people recognise that good land management is in their interests.

Most land-holder families protect their land. There are exceptions to that, but many of those families have been on that land for many generations and they want to see their land preserved for future generations. That is part of their purpose of being on that land. In many circumstances, as the members for Keppel and Surfers Paradise have said, those people hold on to the land even when they are not earning a basic wage. However, they desperately hold on to that land because they want to see it remain productive for future generations so that those future generations are able to make a living out of it.

I can say, through the experience of making leasehold land applications for tree clearing, that the situation has not been as bad as some people would paint it. However, having said that, a different situation applies in relation to freehold land. Freehold land has always been taken to be in a different category from leasehold land. It has always been recognised that leasehold land is leased from the Crown; freehold land is purchased in fee simple, the term meaning that people feel that they own the land and that they can carry out the management practices that they believe will ensure that the land remains productive for future generations.

This legislation that is before the House, and the legislation that was debated in this House previously, cuts across that concept. I believe that the Government could have resolved this issue a lot better than it did. I also say, I believe fairly, that the Government has bungled it. Many land-holders, having seen the outcome of the application of the requirements for leasehold land, were prepared to adopt that type of management on their freehold land. However, when the Minister announced in this Parliament that he did not see any difference between leasehold and freehold land, that triggered an immediate reaction, which the Minister would have to acknowledge. There was panic clearing. In some circumstances, many of the land-holders involved did not think of the consequences of that panic clearing; they just went into it. I know; I have seen that occur around my area. Land that people usually

would not have cleared is now being cleared. I believe that that land would never have been cleared to the extent that it has been cleared—

**Mr Pearce** interjected.

**Mr SLACK:** No, the member should listen to this. The Minister interjected on the shadow Minister or the member for Surfers Paradise that it was rubbish that the officers of the Department of Natural Resources did not support this legislation. I can assure the Minister that I have had discussions with some of those officers, and they agree with what I am saying to the Parliament now. Had the legislation been allowed to take its course in a proper manner; had issues been resolved properly between industry representatives, the conservationists and all the other parties involved; had the Minister and the Premier assured the land-holders that that was the case; and had the land-holders been prepared to take their word for that, I believe that we would not have seen the panic tree clearing that we have witnessed in this State.

Putting that failing aside, there was then the Government's bungling of the issue with the Commonwealth. The Government said that it would bring in land-clearing laws and place restrictions on freehold land, but that the Commonwealth had to foot the compensation bill. That was a bungle. The grossly unfair part of this legislation, which everybody is talking about, is the fact that there is no compensation. The Premier gets up—

**Mr Welford:** The Commonwealth said they'd contribute to a compensation package and they haven't done it.

**Mr SLACK:** That may be so. However, the Minister has the responsibility for this legislation. He has the responsibility to be fair to all Queenslanders. The Premier gets up in this Parliament and espouses the principle of a fair go for all Queenslanders. The Australian ethos is of a fair go. I can tell the Minister that this legislation does not give all Queenslanders a fair go. I can demonstrate that quite succinctly.

For instance, let us look at a freehold property covered partially by timber classified as endangered species. There are many such properties. Many properties contain a significant proportion of endangered species. I have been to one such property. Half its land area was classified as being covered by endangered species. In relation to this land, I rang the Lands Department and asked the officers how much of the standing timber could be cleared. If my memory serves me correctly, it was 40% or 60%. Any potential buyer of that property automatically discounted its price by the amount of land that could not be cleared—in this case, the 40% or 60% of the property covered by that stand of timber.

The Minister cannot say with any honesty in this Parliament or anywhere else that land-holders are not being placed in an unfair position with respect to compensation in these instances by this Government. It is grossly unfair and the Minister knows it. The Minister should not espouse the principle that his Government is a fair one. It is expecting the land-holders who will be affected by this legislation, that is, those who have endangered species, to bear the cost of it on behalf of the wider community. That is where this legislation is patently wrong.

I spoke about my family holdings. As I said before, we cleared that land very carefully according to the book, and a good outcome was achieved. Having said that, I would also say to the House that, in looking at the properties as a whole, we have applied tree clearing to about 50% of the properties. So 50% of the properties remain untouched and probably will remain untouched. Throughout Queensland there are many properties in a similar position.

The other day there was an outcry about AMP applying for a permit. My understanding is that only about 2% of AMP's land-holdings are actually cleared. There is an ongoing argument as to whether trees are regrowth or virgin timber. Most of it is regrowth. From experience, I can assure the Minister that, in most cases, the remaining timber that is virgin timber is thickening. It is not in the state it was in originally when Australia was first settled. There are reasons for that, such as a lack of fires, the pressure of stocking and so on, and this has led to changes in the ecology. A property of ours that was open grazing country is now fairly heavily timbered. If this legislation is passed—and it will be—there is no doubt that there will be economic losses in respect of that property if some of the timber cannot be cleared.

This legislation sounds like ideal legislation when it comes to environmental issues, the Kyoto agreement and so on. However, let us look at an example that highlights some of the unexpected results of legislation such as this. Since the leasehold land has been cleared, leaving shade lines in place, we have had an explosion in kangaroo numbers. The shade lines and the additional water on the property have produced an ideal environment for them. Those lines of timber provide an ideal environment for them to live in and from which they can graze. Consequently, there has been a big explosion in numbers. I believe that has been upheld by scientific research by a gentleman from the University of Southern Queensland. Land-holders will have to either put up electric fences on their properties or engage in heavy shooting campaigns to exterminate the kangaroos in order to ensure

their own survival—a negative outcome for the kangaroo. At the end of the day, most properties tolerate a certain number of kangaroos; people like to see wildlife. But there comes a time when, for their own survival, people have to cull kangaroos. At the end of the day, I believe this will lead to the installation of more electric fencing, which will eliminate kangaroos. In the longer term, this will lead to a decline in kangaroo numbers.

I know that other speakers on this side of the House feel sufficiently outraged by this legislation to want to make a contribution to this debate. I can give another example of how these things have some unintended consequences. The Minister would be aware of the bilby experiment in south-west Queensland. In all good faith and with good intentions the Government purchased a property to ensure an increase in bilby numbers. A letter was sent to us asking for a contribution towards increasing the numbers of bilbies. It sounded good; take away the cattle and the bilby numbers would increase. In fact, I understand that the Minister's research showed that the numbers decreased. And why was that? The cattle protected the bilbies against the dingoes. They foraged among the cattle, and the cattle chased away any dingoes. When the cattle were removed, there was nothing to protect the bilbies. So when the bilbies came out to eat, the dingoes got the bilbies and bilby numbers decreased. I stand to be corrected, but I understand that the Minister is now allowing cattle back into that area. The wildlife and the marsupials adjusted to the conditions that arose through our management of our properties over time.

I assure the Minister that there is revulsion in my electorate and in others at this legislation, based principally on the fact that the Minister has bungled it and has not gone about it in a correct and fair way. The Minister and the Government should be ashamed of the lack of compensation.

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