



Speech by

Mr DOUG SLACK

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Hansard 8 September 2000

NATIVE TITLE RESOLUTION BILL

Mr SLACK (Burnett—NPA) (11.20 a.m.): It is almost beyond belief that we in this House are still debating amendments to this Government's amended and re-amended native title legislation. It would be nice if this was unbelievable, as it seems. However, it is not unbelievable, is it? It is becoming the Beattie Labor Government's standard operating procedure. It seems to have got hold of a lot of unworkable legislation. We have seen three examples of this merry-go-round effect this week—the water resource legislation, vegetation management legislation and now native title. When the Premier promised Queenslanders he would set a dizzying pace in Government, I somehow doubt he had this particular sort of circus in mind. Yet again, Labor promises excellence and delivers catastrophe. Yet again, the Beattie Labor Government whips the wheels off rationality and then argues until it is blue in the face that black is white. Yet again, the legislative process is turned into an expensive farce.

Before I turn to matters relating to native title which impact on my shadow portfolio of State Development and Trade, I want to say one more thing about the Beattie Labor Government, and reference has been made to this by the Leader of the Opposition and the member for Moggill. In his Bulletin magazine column this week, commentator Laurie Oakes made the point that it is the Beazley Federal Labor Party, not the Beattie Queensland Labor Party, that is principled and dignified and which has won a moral victory on this State's latest round of native title amendments. I applaud Mr Beazley's commitment to principle. He is wrong on the policy side of the question, but it is absolutely to his credit that he has stuck to his principles. On native title, the Premier has served up a succession of dog's breakfasts. He has held more positions and gone through more contortions than the Indian rubber man. His principles on native title appear to be that he has no principles.

It is in this environment that Queensland's economic and social progress has been held up—held to ransom, in fact—by the inability of the Beattie Labor Government to organise its legislative program. The guillotines alone that the Leader of the House has trundled out this week are stark testimony to the fact that Government business is a giant bottleneck. Yesterday, the August unemployment figures were released. We heard from my honourable friend the Leader of the Liberal Party in this debate about the brake on growth brought about by Labor's failure to perform as an economic manager of this State. Yesterday when the Premier did not want to answer embarrassing questions about Labor rorting of the electoral system in the anti-democratic pursuit of its own crassly partisan advantage, the Premier was applauding the August figures. He should not have been doing so—not if he is the economic manager of excellence that he claims to be and not if he is the futurist he claims to be.

If he were any sort of economic manager, he would know what the figures really show: that Queensland under Labor is dragging the chain on economic advance against both the national benchmark and Australia's other resource economies. If he were any sort of futurist, he would have drawn absolutely no comfort from the fact that the youth unemployment rate in August was 20%, nearly half a per cent higher than a year ago. The fact is—and the Premier knows it, whether or not he is prepared to say so publicly—that we can no longer take mining exploration for granted in this country. I feel that it is necessary to repeat that statement, drawing on my experiences when I was the Minister and my experiences as the shadow Minister for State Development and Trade: we can no longer take mining exploration for granted in this country. Dr Watson outlined the figures in relation to what other countries are doing. Other countries are making it easier. We are making it harder.

One needs only elementary business education to work out from that equation which way the line on the graph will be going. We cannot be complacent. We need the export dollars from traditional resource stocks more than ever in the new economy if our policy is to promote the welfare of all Queenslanders. The moral imperative is that the wishes of traditional Aboriginal titleholders be respected. That is also the fundamental law. However, since the original judgment in 1993 that native title exists in law, resource development has gone backwards. We must come to grips with the brake this places on our progress as a community. We must act to remove as many hurdles as possible rather than inventing new reasons to create an even bigger bottleneck.

Present arrangements, which will not be improved by this legislation, add time, uncertainty and cost to a range of economic activities from mining to pastoral and agricultural extension, even to tourism infrastructure. They make it harder rather than easier. We have an opportunity to come to terms with this and to confront the policy issue that lies before us, which has nothing to do with feeling warm and fuzzy and everything to do with building a future for Aborigines and every other Australian. The difficulty lies in the practical application of the legislation. It lies in the amount of time required to identify and then find potential claimants and then get them together for negotiations. It lies in the expense of such an operation. It lies in the frequently conflicting claims to traditional ownership of particular tracts of territory. It lies—and let me be absolutely clear about this—in the fact that the argument is often about monetary compensation rather than traditional affinity.

It may be time for an inquiry into the process by which requirements of proof are met, into the bureaucratic barriers to getting a sign-off on heritage and other issues and into the difficult issue of who should actually qualify under native title law. If the Premier were a Premier for all Queenslanders, as he claims—another untested claim—then he would know this and he would not have brought this deficient Bill into this House. I oppose the Bill.
