



Speech by

Mr M. ROWELL

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PRIMARY INDUSTRIES AND NATURAL RESOURCES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr ROWELL (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (5.04 p.m.): This amendment Bill addresses a number of issues within Primary Industries. Probably the most significant is the dissolution of the Queensland Fish Management Authority and the subsequent establishment of the Queensland Fisheries Service. The QFMA as we now know it was established in 1994 with the passage of the Fisheries Act 1994 with, I understand, strong support from both the recreational and commercial fishing sectors in Queensland at the time. In fact, I understand that very supportive, almost fervent, representations were made to the then Opposition spokesman for Primary Industries to throw bipartisan support behind its establishment. At the time, it was argued that there was a pressing need to take the politics out of fisheries; to base fisheries decisions on science and sound environmental management in close conjunction with the industry itself. Importantly, that body had a degree of autonomy.

The Queensland Fish Management Authority was set up as an independent statutory authority to manage the fishing industry in Queensland. A board comprising industry, scientific and Government expertise was appointed and supported by a series of management committees for every fishery and every region of Queensland, which also comprised local fishing industry representatives and other expertise. Over the years since then, the QFMA has enjoyed mixed success.

I am not wedded to the QFMA and certainly not to the concept of statutory authorities, and this is not entirely surprising considering the enormous and often divisive issues the authority has had to deal with. To its credit, the QFMA has played a valuable role in providing a forum for all the stakeholders to come together and develop management plans for the State's fisheries. Some meetings between the Queensland Commercial Fishermen's Organisation and the recreational fishermen have had to be adjudicated on. Certainly, a lot of information was provided by QFMA personnel. The progress of developing those management plans has not always been optimum, but there is a range of reasons to explain that.

Certainly, any process that involves intensive consultation between parties who often have divergent views is never going to be completed overnight. That is a sacrifice that is perhaps made with the sort of structure the QFMA entailed. As I said, there have been many difficult situations and many controversial issues have been raised among commercial fishermen and recreational fishermen and the general public. Inevitably, there has been some frustration about the processes employed by the QFMA and some of the outcomes of its deliberations within the fishing fraternity and obviously within the Minister's office, and that has led to its demise. It is a pity that that happened. A lot of good intentions were behind many of the opinions put forward and adjudicated on by the QFMA.

However, it is worth noting that perhaps one of the most frustrating periods for both the fishing industry and the QFMA itself has been the past 12 months. In January I highlighted my concern that the fisheries review, which the Minister promised would be completed and implemented within three months, was still languishing on his bookshelf six months later. The Minister has to acknowledge that this took a long time. That added to the frustration out there. It is only now, nearly 12 months since that review was initiated, that we are finally debating this Bill to complete the restructure process.

Of great concern to me is the fact that in that time well over a dozen highly qualified staff have left the QFMA in frustration and that the progress in developing a number of important management plans has ground to a halt. In January I noted also that delays in appointing a replacement chairman

and member to the Fisheries Tribunal had led to the accumulation of more than 60 appeals. That was very frustrating. Those vacancies occurred last August and it is a travesty that the Minister's sloth-like speed in replacing them saw jobs and investment hanging in limbo for so long.

Before the QFMA's inception, fisheries was under the one banner. Now that the Beattie Government has decided to abolish the QFMA and instead form the QFS, one cannot help feeling a sense of déjà vu. The Minister has lamented a lack of influence over fisheries decisions, but he will now very much have control of the levers. As such, this new structure will be as good as the Minister in charge! I think the Minister has to take this seriously. Instead of an independent organisation being charged with the decision-making process, to a large extent he will be at the helm of whatever progress the Queensland Fisheries Service makes for the people of Queensland.

If the Minister is prepared to be a strong advocate of the industry and make the tough decisions on the best scientific advice available, there should be few problems. However, the obvious potential for political interference poses a risk that management decisions could be based on little more than vote buying exercises or populism. We have already had a taste of that when the Minister sacked the former QFMA board, a board containing qualified, politically independent members, and replaced it with his appointments, which included a former Labor Minister and one of his own former staffers. It is the case that there were people with a political persuasion involved in the QFMA, and I do not think he can really deny that. We saw it again more recently with the appointment of an old Labor mate to the Fisheries Tribunal, a man of extremely dubious character with questionable standing in the community. If this is the sort of management in store under this new structure, sound management of the fisheries will be sacrificed for political pragmatism.

Once this legislation is passed, the Minister will have the levers firmly in his hands, and the coalition and the industry will be watching closely to ensure that he keeps fisheries on track. Fisheries is a very important industry right throughout this State. Whether it is the recreation, commercial or aquaculture side of the industry—or whatever it might be—it will all come under the Minister's jurisdiction. I know of the intensity of the decision-making process, because there is enormous sensitivity from time to time within fisheries about how and when decisions are going to be made.

The Minister indicated that there is a strong level of support for dispensing with the QFMA and the creation of the Queensland Fisheries Service, headed by a deputy director-general of the Department of Primary Industries. There is support, although I detect that there is also a degree of resignation about this restructure. I say "resignation" because the structure alone will not improve the management of the Queensland fisheries. I suppose it is like any legislation that we put in place: the legislation is only as good as those people who actually operate it. If there is a determination to get the best out of the management process, then we will have a good, sound structure. Simply putting legislation in place is not really the answer to every concern that a sound management plan will have. It certainly has a contributing factor, but there have to be people there who have the capacity. I can hope only that the Minister will do that.

Fisheries has a wide spectrum of interest. There are the tourist interests, the commercial interests in the wild, commercial interests in aquaculture and there are the prospects of what can happen inland as far as fisheries is concerned. So there is a whole range of issues that are extremely important. There must be a concerted effort to ensure a more inclusive and more proactive administration. It is to be hoped that the association with the management and zonal advisory committees will be maintained and enhanced in this new structure, as they form a valuable part of advice and management required in the fishery.

Up and down the coast there are a number of dedicated, hands-on people who make substantial contributions to the fishing industry resources in Queensland coastal waters—and not just in Queensland coastal waters. Those people have enormous expertise and they must be utilised for the benefit of our fisheries. We have now been through the process of having the Government involved in determining what happens in fisheries. We have moved away from that with the introduction of the QFMA, an independent body that was funded through levies from licences and all those types of things. Now, to a large degree, the wheel has turned the full circle.

As I said, a restructure alone will not improve fisheries administration in this State. Such a restructure must be supported by a concerted commitment to boost resources to on-the-ground fisheries. As such, I would ask the Minister to give a commitment that the savings from this restructure, which should be considerable, will not be relinquished to the Treasury coffers but will instead be held by the QFS and invested into restocking programs, protecting fish habitats and other such on-the-ground projects. For instance, administration costs soaked up nearly two-thirds of the QFMA's \$7.5m budget and \$342,000 was spent on the office rent alone.

The coalition will be watching closely, as I know that both sectors of the fishery industry will be—and we are talking about commercial and recreation—to ensure that the savings are retained with Fisheries in the upcoming Budget. We know that the Beattie Budget is shaping up to be not so

good—perhaps a shocker. I hope that the Minister has stood very vigilant to ensure that the restructure has not been used as a smokescreen to plunder the Fisheries budget.

Some related fishing issues need to be raised. The implementation of the by-catch reduction devices during the period of the coalition Government had a positive impact on the operation of commercial operations. The turtle exclusion devices were also recognised. The trawlers are out to improve their image so that they are seen as a responsible group who contribute to the Queensland economy, and they certainly do.

John Olsen, who played a major role in the development of these devices, was recognised by the coalition when in Government with a \$10,000 assistance package to travel to countries of the world that had adopted those devices to gauge what improvements could be made to the Queensland industry's initiatives. John has done an enormous amount of work. I do not know him particularly well, but I understand that he has now become the chairman of the QCFO. I think that the QCFO is in good hands. As I said, John Olsen is responsible and he certainly thinks a lot of our fisheries and how sustainability and improvements can take place as far as the commercial organisation is concerned. Generally it was found that the developments of these devices in Queensland were at least as good, if not better, than those of other fishing countries around the world.

The implementation of the vessel monitoring systems was also an initiative carried out during the period of the coalition Government. This system had the potential to assist the determination of areas that were required to be closed and to track the fishing fleet from QFMA headquarters. If a mapping system is coordinated with it, it has the potential to provide the accurate location of a fishing vessel. It would be a major benefit. Of course, this matter needs to be attended to in order to ensure that a vessel is fully aware of its location.

One of the major advantages of the VMS is to locate vessels quickly in the event of an emergency. It has become evident that this has proven not to be the case, as it took something like 40 minutes for the signal to be acknowledged from a vessel off Hervey Bay. Other trawlers have sunk off Bundaberg and Gladstone, with similar failings of the VMS systems reported. This is a serious concern. The Minister needs to do something about it. These failings need to be addressed as a top priority. Some time in the future, as technology develops, travelling time for trawlers can be reduced and it may be possible to determine the activities being carried out. This would be particularly useful and timesaving as a trawler may then be able to travel over sensitive areas with a degree of impunity.

The trawl industry is currently developing a plan to reduce effort in the East Coast Trawl Fishery. I attended a meeting in Townsville at the request of the QCFO and received a comprehensive four-hour briefing by Ted Loveday and Alan Hansen. They have certainly worked very hard on this plan. While the plan has developed over the past year, in the earlier stages it caused a degree of anxiety amongst the trawling industry. However, it is being refined. It now appears that the concerns that trawlers once held are being addressed. Of course, with a plan as complex as this, it will take some time, but persistence will prevail. A number of people within the industry are working very hard on the trawl fishery plan, including the current chairman, John Olsen.

Senator Hill made demands on the industry to reduce effort by 25% over the next five years. The industry was extremely concerned but has now come up with a plan to reduce that same effort in a shorter time frame provided that \$30m is made available, of which \$10m is to be contributed by the Commonwealth, which issued licences and was part of the increase in effort. That is a very important point that needs to be made. The coalition in Government contributed \$5m to a licence buyback program. Despite all the posturing by this Government when it came to power in June 1998, no funding has been provided to continue that program.

That was an extremely important program. We should undertake buybacks gradually. However, if a lot of finance is involved, it can be done in a shorter period of time. I believe that change is something that is best handled slowly. People who are involved in an industry such as the fishing industry have different aspirations. If, at the end of the day, they decide to get out, they should have the ability to do that rather than coming and going in stops and starts and causing an enormous amount of angst. To some degree, that has happened with the plan that has been devised. We should alleviate tension and instability in relation to keeping licences or replacing boats. Continuity is an important aspect of any buyback plan.

When we were in Government we did something about this. In all fairness, I do not think that the Government has done very much simply by continuing the \$5m plan that we put in place. I am not condemning the Government; I am simply stating the facts.

Mr Palaszczuk: We have \$10m in place now.

Mr ROWELL: \$30m needs to be raised in a buyback plan. It would have been easier to continue with \$5m over the past two years. That may have brought the industry to a more equitable position in a shorter time.

There are many aspects to the fishing industry apart from commercial activities. Recreational fishing has tremendous appeal in our climate. All along the Queensland coastline and rivers the activities of amateur anglers are increasing. People are coming here from overseas for this purpose. Whether it is line fishing in rivers and creeks or chasing marlin off Cairns, we are certainly a popular spot with amateur anglers in various fishing activities. The coalition is mindful of the challenge to provide a sustainable fishing industry both for commercial operators and amateur anglers. The real challenge is to get that balance right and to make sure that the industry is sustainable. We need to do that for the people who are investing money in boats and all the other equipment that is involved. We do not want to get to the point at which these buyback schemes become necessary. The proper management of fisheries is a challenge.

Fish stocking is an integral part of ensuring that the resource is replenished. During our period in Government, I was involved in the release of fingerlings. As I mentioned earlier, perhaps some of the savings from the QFMA which have been brought under the DPI umbrella could be diverted into restocking rather than returning those savings to Treasury. There would be support from Karumba to the Gold Coast for an increase in the restocking of the wild fishery and impoundments throughout the State. If the Queensland Fisheries Service is to be a success—as seems to be the expectation according to a glossy brochure called Queensland Fisheries News—we should see even greater activity by the department.

The aquaculture industry has a great deal of potential. I am aware of a number of very successful operations and the need to continue research to assist the industry to expand. One way of providing support would be to assist applicants for aquaculture ventures to wade through the plethora of paperwork and for the department to take a proactive role in the establishment of new enterprises. I am not suggesting for one minute that we should partner them in some way, but there are difficulties to be faced. Many people who have tried to get an aquaculture development under way have found it extremely difficult to meet all the requirements. It would be tremendous if those people could receive more assistance. I know that the DPI offers people a great deal of assistance regarding the approval process. However, aquaculture developments along the coast are having all sorts of problems. People who are willing to contribute considerable amounts of money to these developments should receive every assistance and should not be stifled by some departments which make it hard for them. If we listen to the Department of Environment and Heritage, life should start at the foothills and any development on the shoreline or any development involving aquaculture has a big question mark over it.

Currently, the Hinchinbrook and Cardwell Shires are progressing with a coastal development plan. The locals are on guard about the possible outcome. There are prospects of growing barramundi, cod and coral trout in ponds. The DPI in Cairns is conducting a substantial program with reef fish. I was pleased to hand over something like \$750,000 for additional tanks. This is an area into which funding could be productively channelled. The live coral trout trade has tremendous potential; very big prices are paid overseas for that fish. If we could grow them in ponds—even though that presents a few challenges—it would be of enormous benefit to Queensland, particularly our agriculture industry.

Other prospects in relation to inland fisheries have not been well supported by this Labor Government. If more attention was focused on this program, it could assist in the development of a new industry for inland Queensland. Work carried out at Walkamin funded by the coalition had the potential of identifying fish and crustaceans suited for freshwater. I notice that the member for Callide is in the Chamber. When I was in the Callide electorate, I saw the developments that are taking place with red claw in areas such as Biloela. However, this industry is becoming quite expensive to establish. Ponds have to be built and they have to be covered because of the bird life. There is another element to growing these fish. The requirements and the expertise needed—

Mr Palaszczuk: It's a great market.

Mr ROWELL: There is no question of that. There is enormous potential. I know from my own experience that when people put in the ponds and put nets up—in many cases very costly and substantial structures have to be erected—they have to make absolutely certain that they will get good financial outcomes. I hope the moves being made by this Government in relation to the Queensland Fisheries Service will be successful. If they are not, it will set back an industry with the prospect of being worth \$1 billion in many areas of regional Queensland and other areas right throughout the State.

I acknowledge the general support of the industry for the amendments to abolish the QFMA and establish the Queensland Fisheries Service. The industry says that it is a move in the right direction, so I cannot deny the Government's proposal. As such, the coalition will not oppose that aspect of the Bill. However, we will maintain a watching brief on the QFS to ensure that the performance of it and the Minister meet the expectations created in the fishing community.

There is a concern that, as a result of its focus under Labor in Queensland, the DPI is becoming a consumer organisation rather than a primary industries agency. Buzz words such as "food and fibre" are more relevant to the consumer than to those who shed their blood, sweat and tears to produce the

primary industry's products. The renaming and reorganising of agencies will mean nothing unless there is a will to achieve successful outcomes. It is to be hoped that the disbanding of the QFMA meets the expectations of the internal review and is user friendly.

I refer to the Timber Research and Development Advisory Council, a former statutory body now required to change to a volunteer organisation, which will become an incorporated company limited by guarantee. The restructure of this organisation has come about as a result of the Primary Industry Bodies Reform Act, which forced primary industries to seek volunteer contributions. In the legislation there is no mention of stamp duty relief and no reference to a commitment to provide ex gratia relief subsequent to the restructure. The amendment to the Forestry Act 1959 seeks to restructure the organisation. According to the Minister's second-reading speech, the industry requested the legislation to allow the restructuring following the recent termination of the statutory additional stumpage charge that was used to fund TRADAC. I have been informed that there is a requirement for stamp duty to be paid.

This is just another statutory organisation that has been caught up in this Labor Government's legislation to dump an organised industry. Yes, the industry requested the change, but it was difficult for it to do otherwise given the situation presented to it by the Minister. I am aware that the short notice of these changes has removed financial certainty for TRADAC and has led it to having to cancel a number of industry programs that it would normally have contributed to. I am disturbed that, despite the public protestations by the Minister and his Government that they are committed to the future of the timber industry, their actions have undermined the activities and promotion of our valuable timber industry.

I turn now to the repeal of the Primary Industries Corporation Act 1992. The Department of Primary Industries has been advised that it will need to apply for an Australian business number if it intends to maintain the legislation according to the Minister's second-reading speech. If this legislation were not repealed, a separate set of books would be required to administer the legislation, and other administrative difficulties may have been encountered. Given that the policy under which the Primary Industries Corporation was established is no longer supported, the Opposition has little difficulty with the organisation's dissolution. A considerable number of assets have been accumulated by the corporation over a period of time. Assets for State water projects, which do not directly come under the umbrella of primary industries, are worth something like \$2 billion.

Mr Palaszczuk: That is the value of the dam.

Mr ROWELL: I know. I do not have a clear differentiation of what cash it has on hand.

Mr Palaszczuk: What you have there is a pretty hurried document. We can give you a more detailed breakdown.

Mr ROWELL: Perhaps we will talk about that at the Estimates hearings. I think that is an appropriate place to be dealing with that matter.

I want to make sure that Queensland's primary industries get every penny they deserve. I do not want to see that money going into consolidated revenue. I make that point because we struggle for finances. As a former Minister, I know how difficult things are. If Treasury tries to take some money away from Primary Industries, I will be yelling from the rooftops about it. Primary industries in Queensland—it does not matter which industry—need every cent they can possibly get and as much backing as possible. I will support the Minister when it comes to funding the needs of the wide range of industries in Queensland.

The Opposition basically agrees with the legislation. We do not have any major problems with it. From time to time when we make changes unexpected things will happen. The best laid plans do not always come to fruition. I can only hope that the expectations of the many people in the fishing industry in particular are met. It is an enormous growth area. It has potential. There certainly need to be some caps in relation to trawling. Aquaculture, inland fisheries and so on could be worth a lot of money to Queensland. If there is any way in which the department can assist those industries, I think it is extremely important that it does so. I have made that case in my speech. Generally there is support for this Bill.
