



Speech by

Mr M. ROWELL

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

Hansard 7 September 2000

VEGETATION MANAGEMENT AMENDMENT BILL

Mr ROWELL (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (9.06 p.m.): It is with a great deal of concern that I rise to speak to the Vegetation Management Amendment Bill, because many land-holders around Queensland are being forced into a very untenable position. In many cases people have bought freehold land which they intended to develop in good faith. In industries such as the sugar industry and so on, development is usually staged. It is not a matter of knocking everything down as quickly as possible. It is a matter of considering how money will be spent most efficiently to ensure a balance between agronomics and economics.

A lot of concern has been expressed. In fact, in my part of the world land management codes of practice are being developed. There is very little recognition in Bills such as this one of work that has been done over a relatively long period. Certainly there is no recognition of voluntary arrangements.

I believe there is commitment on the part of people who purchase property. Very often they spend quite a bit of money to buy land that has trees on it. Then they consider how they will go about clearing it. In most cases they have to go to financial institutions to make those types of arrangements. When people buy land there is an anticipation, in accordance with the original planning, about clearing the land and bringing it into production somewhere down the track. It is very concerning for landowners to then be told that they have to go through an exhaustive process. This legislation makes it extremely difficult for those people.

It is quite clear that there was no push from the Federal Government. It was not offering any funds for land clearing, irrespective of what the Premier may have said. The State is providing no compensation whatsoever to people who want to clear their land and cannot. The land is virtually locked up. The original intended use of the land could be curtailed for some time. The economics has certainly been put on the line. It could be extremely difficult for landowners to maintain their viability. Other States have paid for their own land-clearing legislation. This Government is taking away the personal rights of people, purely to buy green votes.

The clearing of leasehold land has been regulated for some time, and that is the right of the Crown, because the people of Queensland own that land. Clearing is prohibited within 200 metres of rivers, 50 metres or thereabouts of creeks and 20 metres of gullies. It is debateable what constitutes a gully. In the tropical areas of Queensland, the declaration of a gully would mean that clearing of land is prohibited for 20 metres on either side. That would virtually make some of these areas impossible to farm. No consideration is being given to the topography of Wet Tropics areas. In some cases there are natural waterways that can be realigned and treated in a manner that will place those who have to farm those properties in a more tenable situation in terms of planting and harvesting their crops.

The whole issue of clearing and developing properties will become bogged down in the planning exercise. This Bill provides for regional vegetation management committees that the Government is currently establishing and will develop under the bioregional plan on which the whole concept is based. It could take some time for this to be put in place. The Department of Environment and Department of Natural Resources has to deal with not only the vegetation management plan but also water issues. I believe it will be some time before people who make applications will have them processed and can get on with the job of undertaking the critical planning that is required and developing the land that they have either just purchased or had in their possession for some time.

If property holders had sufficient funds, they may have undertaken clearing to ensure certainty. That is of some concern. This Bill has precipitated some unnecessary clearing to create certainty for land-holders who want to ensure that, somewhere down the track, they can go about the planning and development of their country. These people have probably undertaken more clearing than was ever anticipated. Of course, they have had to have the funds to do it. They may have stretched their resources and, in some instances, if they were sugar farmers, they may have done so at a time when money was not freely available.

There is no appeal process contained in this Bill. I think the member for Fitzroy mentioned that matter. That is a detrimental feature of the Bill.

I want to report on the treatment that this Minister has inflicted on one of my constituents, Luis Pajares. If the Minister cares to listen, I will go through what Mr Pajares had to do before this plan came in. I think it is a precursor of what will happen to many people in the future. Mr Pajares is still negotiating on 3,000 hectares of his freehold property in Tully. There is no evidence that there are mahogany gliders on this particular country. This Government has come up with a lousy deal. It offered him so much in the first instance, and I understand from Mr Pajares—if the Minister is listening—that that offer has been cut in half. He has now been issued with five interim conservation orders—remember that there are no mahogany gliders on his freehold land—to stop him from clearing that freehold property. They are now putting pegs around 100 acres of cleared land—not land that has trees on it—because these zealots decided they wanted this particular piece of land. Irrespective of whether it has trees on it or not, they have pegged it out for resumption.

Mr Reynolds: Is this about the map that the former—

Mr ROWELL: I am getting to it. The member knows all about it. That is good. The survey pegs have cut corners off paddocks, which has made it particularly difficult for Mr Pajares to continue his farming operation. He had a hut on the Murray River on freehold land. He has now been told that that hut is no longer his. He has been told to take it away. That building is on freehold land but Mr Pajares has been ordered to take it away. The Minister does not want to listen.

Mr Reynolds: That was a finding by the previous Minister.

Mr ROWELL: We will get to that. I know that the member is the fount of all knowledge in this House.

In April 1999 we met in Townsville with Minister Welford and Barry Carbon to deal with this issue. This process has been going on for 18 months or more. I think that is an absolute disgrace. First this man is offered one thing and then the Government cuts the offer in half. What does the member for Townsville think about that? Is that fair and reasonable? That is an action taken by this Government. I will come to the bit that the member for Townsville wants to hear about.

Mr Pajares met with then Minister Brian Littleproud on 3 April 1998, and they signed a map delineating exactly which area was to be kept by Mr Pajares.

Mr Reynolds: Who actually agreed to that?

Mr ROWELL: Minister Littleproud. I wish he was in the Chamber at present because he could verify this. That document signifies the intent of a Minister of the Crown. Lines were drawn on a map. They both signed the map. There was a clear delineation of what this was all about. That document evidenced the intent on the part of the Minister as to what was to happen. 1,400 acres were to be kept for farming. Mr Pajares had decided that was a reasonable amount of the 3,000 acres. 1,600 acres were to be sold to the Government for a price to be negotiated. But the Department of Environment staff did absolutely nothing about it for six weeks, until the coalition lost Government. I will not say they are greenies; I will not say they were Labor Party people; I am just outlining exactly what happened. Absolutely nothing was done for six weeks.

I notice that the Minister does not want to listen to this, but it is important, because I want to tell the House just how this Government will operate in the future in terms of freehold land.

Mr McGrady: We'll be here a long time.

Mr ROWELL: The Minister has a little problem up in the Basilisk Range with his people illegally clearing some Crown land. Does he know about that?

Mr McGrady: I know all about it.

Mr ROWELL: Does the Minister want me to tell Parliament about it? The Minister is going to do a certain thing. He has talked about a facility that the Government is going to build. He has led people up the garden path by claiming that only a survey was going to be carried out. Quite clearly, the Minister has no intention of taking any notice of anybody. He is going to do exactly what he wants to do.

Mr McGrady: I've been up there.

Mr ROWELL: And did the Minister see the mess they created, filling in creeks, making a mess in the tropical rainforest of Queensland?

Mr McGrady: Contractors.

Mr ROWELL: The Minister knows all about it. Does he admit it? No, he will not admit it; he just goes to water when it comes to the crunch.

It is extremely important that we acknowledge what has happened to Mr Pajares, because in the future we will see many more cases such as his. It is extremely disappointing that this legislation will give the Minister even more power than he had before.
