



Speech by

**Mr M. ROWELL**

**MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK**

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Hansard 17 October 2000

**NATURE CONSERVATION AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

**Mr ROWELL** (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (2.30 p.m.): The Nature Conservation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill raises a number of important issues. In relation to the southern Queensland RFA proposal, there have been concerns about job prospects, forest planting activity and ensuring that over time forests are available for an industry that will be dependent on them. Agreements have been struck with the sawmillers. Those agreements will provide them with a degree of security. All businesses need security. In relation to Boral's Nandroya mill, I note that when I drove past it the other day there were very few cars parked outside. That mill is being wound down, which is of enormous concern to the community. That mill has provided job opportunities in the area for a long time. The mill's former work force is now employed by Main Roads and the council. I understand some of its former workers are still looking for employment. In the current economic environment jobs are not easy to find, especially in that area.

In the future, if a mill within the areas under the agreement wishes to sell out it will have to go to the Government first. The Government would have the first right of refusal in relation to the purchase of a mill. Of course, that depresses the price of milling operations and the return to the owners. When a milling operation ceases, what will happen to the workers? Will the same thing happen to them as happened to the workers at Nandroya? What of workers who think they have security under this agreement and who subsequently find that the operator of the mill cannot continue? Will they face the prospect of having to look for another job?

The 25-year time frame for plantation forests needs to be examined. To some degree this aspect is unknown. We are not certain how long it will take for these trees to reach a stage at which they can be milled. The size of the trees may create some limitations. Pinewood forests grow rapidly, but hardwood forests grow much more slowly. If within 25 years those trees do not reach the stage at which they are suitable for milling, there will be a question in the transition period as to what will happen in native forests.

I believe that to some extent the Bill is politically motivated. Extreme pressure is being applied by a number of vociferous environmental groups. A lot of recreational forest users do not seem to have been given adequate consideration. Other speakers have mentioned four-wheel drivers, trail bike riders and people who ride horses through State forests for recreation. We are not certain of exactly where those recreational activities will be able to be conducted. For example, in the past young children might have been able to ride a horse along the trails in those forests close to their home. In future, if they have to travel some distance they might become dependent on their parents for transport.

**Mr Lester:** It's a right that's being taken away.

**Mr ROWELL:** That is exactly right. I am pleased the honourable member raised that point, which I was going to make anyway. People will no longer have the same access to these forests. That is of concern, because recreational activities are important to many people, be they young or old.

I wish to compare what is happening now with what happened when parts of north Queensland were World Heritage listed. I am aware of the downside when timber and milling operations are closed. Under the Hawke Government, then Senator Richardson visited north Queensland and announced a cessation of logging in World Heritage areas. That was done purely for political reasons; it was done to win votes. I do not think Richardson cared about the forests. In fact, he demonstrated that sometime

later. He saw a political opportunity and he took it. It was decided that in areas that had been logged selectively for probably over 100 years logging would no longer be allowed to continue. However, those areas, where only about two trees in an area the size of a football field had been logged every 40 years, were still sufficiently good enough for World Heritage listing. There was some doubt about the sincerity of the whole operation.

Some 1,000 jobs were lost throughout north Queensland when that area was World Heritage listed. A number of mills between the tablelands, Innisfail, Ingham and further afield were no longer able to mill timber and provide their valuable product and diverse job opportunities for people in those areas. In addition to the mills closing, for example, the hauling contractors and the people who brought out the logs, harvested them and put them onto trucks were also denied jobs, and towns suffered. If we look at the 2.5 to 1 ratio, which is a fairly acceptable ratio for jobs, we see that those districts lost a lot of support industries that had been dependent on the timber industry.

Queensland foresters were acclaimed as being some of the best in the world. A number of them went overseas and assisted many countries to plan their forestry. They did an excellent job. The Minister wants to refer to the forestry—

**Mr Welford** interjected.

**Mr ROWELL:** I am talking about the World Heritage area.

Other facilities came into question once those areas were designated. I wish to speak very briefly about communications. In that part of the world there is often a need for towers, dishes and so on in order to facilitate communications. I hope that what we are doing through this Bill will not create similar problems to those I have seen recently in north Queensland.

The coastguard wanted to put a repeater station on top of Mount Bowen on Hinchinbrook Island but was not allowed to do it mainly because of the aesthetics. If somebody climbed that 3,000-odd foot peak, got to the top and said, "Well, blow me, here is a communication tower", it would be a let-down to them. People who may risk their lives were not considered, because they wanted to put a VHF transmitter tower up there.

It could have been hidden in different ways. I know that in many areas of the world those sorts of things can be made to look like trees. There could be a little box at the bottom which just looks like the stump of the tree and the branches could adequately act as antennae, but we could not do that. So they went to two or three other islands such as Goold Island and Pelorus Island and installed a couple of facilities when one would have done the job adequately.

I would also like to talk about Powerlink. This situation may arise in south-east Queensland when transmission lines have to go through this new natural resource area of national park that is going to be created. At present there is a great deal of reluctance by the Wet Tropics Management Authority to consider keeping the same alignment of a transmission line. Powerlink is proposing to go through an area of canefields and put in these towers and create new easements and new difficulties for people in getting around the towers, thus devaluing their properties when they could simply continue it on the existing alignment and adjacent to the current powerline.

**Mr Welford** interjected.

**Mr ROWELL:** It will fit. It can fit. Can the Minister tell me what they are going to do when they take the transmission line from Innisfail up to Cairns? The same situation applies there. There is a 132,000 volt line coming right down from Kareeya, going through Innisfail and going up to Cairns. Eventually we have to replace the whole lot of that with a 275,000 volt line in order to get adequate power into Cairns. We will then have to decide what we are going to do in that region from Innisfail up to Cairns to replace that 132,000 volt line with a 275,000 volt line. If it can be done there, it can be done in the rainforest. I believe there is determination from us to do exactly that. We can put in towers that go over the top of the canopy and we can plant trees underneath. Then there would be no interruptions as far as the animals and the other things are concerned in going across that cleared area that exists at present.

Tully/Millstream is another one that was denied to us because of a World Heritage listing. It would have been an excellent project which would have supplied something like 600 megawatts of power—clean, green energy. Despite all that, we were not allowed to go ahead with Tully/Millstream. If anybody had attempted it, enormous difficulties would have arisen. I am extremely concerned because it would have been a good project and it would have provided good, clean energy for Queensland.

I would now like to talk about tourism. Tourism was considered to be a panacea as far as this area is concerned. When the World Heritage listing took place, people talked very widely about having ecotourism, about the fact that people who were losing their jobs in the timber industry would go into ecotourism. However, the draft plan lacked the support for doing that type of thing in this region and it was extremely disappointing. Not only did the people lose their jobs, but the capacity to generate other activities and other industries was denied.

The people from the Wet Tropics who actually did it were very inexperienced in terms of understanding what the region was all about. I think one was a Canadian who had been here for 18 months and the other person had been in north Queensland for only about two years. We received very little support to get the tourist industry up and going in the wet tropical region. We could have built walking tracks; we could have done lots of things. In fact, there were existing roads there. The road from the top of the Kirrama Range across to Ravenshoe is now overgrown. The culverts left from the timber industry are in disrepair. I think that it would have been an excellent place for walking tracks or for four-wheel drive activity so that people who were disabled—people who could not walk these areas—could have driven along that road.

The H road was another very interesting road because it went from the Tully Gorge up to Millaa Millaa. That road was built by the electricity authority some time ago during the period when the Kareeya power station was built. The disastrous thing—and I mean disastrous—that happened to that road was that the electricity authority, Powerlink, decided that it would bulldoze a hole in the middle of the road. I find it very interesting that no punitive measures were taken against the electricity authority for the work it did there. That road was very serviceable, very useable, and it would have allowed the development of a great area for tourism.

In relation to the road to Wallaman Falls, a road that has been built up over a period of time in various stretches, we saw the ridiculous situation in which gravel was brought some 300 kilometres from Charters Towers to Ingham because it matched the colour of the surrounding soils, and damned me if it did not turn black, anyway. We go to all these pedantic lengths to implement strategies to ensure that we do have something that matches the local aesthetics and environment that all the green people can feel warm and fuzzy about, but the next thing we find is that it was not of much benefit and the whole concept was a waste of time.

I want to speak about the Dalrymple track because it has some similarities as far as horse riding is concerned. The Minister might laugh about horse riding.

**Mr Welford:** What's this got to do with the RFA? None of this has anything to do with the RFA.

**Mr ROWELL:** I am going to draw the comparison because it is going to be very doubtful as to whether people will be able to ride horses in this new national park concept that the Minister is creating for south-east Queensland. I want to let people in Parliament know what happened as far as the Dalrymple track was concerned because it has the similarities that I want to talk about.

This track had been there for some 100 years. This was a track that was used by the first settlers who came into the district, who came in the ships to Cardwell and then went over this track—it is a gap in the range—and went through to the Valley of Lagoons and all these areas. It might be strange to the Minister, but 100 years ago they used horses to go over this area. People wanted to do exactly the same thing now, but they were told, "No, you cannot ride horses in a national park", despite the fact that people had been riding horses along this road for almost a century. The Minister should listen to me because he does not know what life is really all about. He comes from a closeted environment and he has some very definite views about issues. There is no doubt about that. He laughs about them and he thinks that it is a great joke. But people who want to do this type of thing are going to be denied the opportunity. The reason that they were not able to use this Dalrymple track was that some seeds might grow in the horse manure that are not natural to the national park or to the World Heritage area. However, horses, have been traversing that area for 100 years.

**Mr Welford:** You were in Government for a couple of years, weren't you. Why didn't you change the policy?

**Mr ROWELL:** This all occurred after we left Government, when the members opposite got back into Government. Up to that time and during the Goss era this was happening and nobody was concerned about the fact that people could ride a horse through that area. In fact, some of the great trail riders were intending to use it.

Hinchinbrook Island is another area. The people whom the Minister administers act like God there. They get in helicopters and they drop incendiaries on top of the mountains at Hinchinbrook Island. They do this because they want to burn the rainforest out a bit. They do not want it encroaching on the wet savanna areas—those environments they want to create biodiversity with. They acted like God as far as those particular areas are concerned.

I recall that during September four or five years ago Hinchinbrook Island was on fire. It was going up in smoke. Surely the Minister remembers that he opposed Port Hinchinbrook and that he was adamant that the development should not go ahead. Hinchinbrook Island is not near Port Hinchinbrook; it is across the way. However, there was so much smoke from the island that it chased people out of Cardwell during the school holiday period. These are the kinds of things that happen because of the decisions of those warm and cuddly people in the Minister's department. This will touch Port Hinchinbrook—

Time expired.