



Speech by

Hon. R. E. BORBIDGE

MEMBER FOR SURFERS PARADISE

Hansard 7 September 2000

VEGETATION MANAGEMENT AMENDMENT BILL

Hon. R. E. BORBIDGE (Surfers Paradise—NPA) (Leader of the Opposition) (4.11 p.m.): Once again we find ourselves debating a piece of legislation that represents one of the Beattie Labor Government's most outrageous assaults on the property rights of Queensland landowners; legislation that, with one sweep of the Premier's pen, will effectively remove any distinction between leasehold and freehold title in this State; legislation that allows the Government to assume responsibility for land management from the very people who own the land; legislation that will bog rural and regional Queensland down in a morass of red tape and regulation; and legislation that will see this Labor Government strip hundreds of millions of dollars out of rural industries and the State economy.

The reason we are again debating the Vegetation Management Act and these amendments today is that the Beattie Government got it wrong to start with, and it has got it wrong again, because the Premier and his inept and out-of-touch Natural Resources Minister refused to engage land-holders in the development of a practical and conciliatory policy for the management of vegetation.

Government members: We don't agree with that.

Mr BORBIDGE: If Government members listen, they might. They instead chose to manufacture a public campaign of misinformation and deceit about the extent of tree clearing in Queensland and about the attitude of land-holders to managing their land. From his lofty position of judgment in the leather seat of the Government jet, 10,000 feet above the ground, the Premier tried to paint land-holders as environmental vandals out to plunder and destroy their properties. The State was on fire, he said. Land-holders were destroying their properties and had to be stopped, he claimed. That was the spin. But rather than take on board the recommendations of the Vegetation Management Advisory Committee, rather than work with the land-holders and rural industry, rather than even consult with them, the Premier, in his infinite wisdom, chose to ignore them and cook up his own answer.

The legacy of the Premier's bungling of the tree-clearing issue is the Vegetation Management Act, legislation that land-holders do not support; legislation that farm organisations do not support; legislation that the Department of Primary Industries does not support; legislation that the Department of Natural Resources officers out in the field do not support; legislation that even the environmental organisations do not support; legislation that was uncovered for all the stakeholders at only one minute to midnight at the end of last year, just before the Beattie Government used its one-seat majority to guillotine debate and prevent non-Government members from representing the interests of freehold landowners in their electorates, as it is doing again today.

Mr Sullivan: You ran a filibuster for two weeks before that.

Mr BORBIDGE: Over the course of the Beattie Government's campaign against land-holders, there has been one constant, one thing that has prevailed, and that has been the Premier's out and out dishonesty.

Mr Sullivan: We saw it coming. You planned it, and you knew what you were doing.

Mr BORBIDGE: I will say it again for the Government Whip: the Premier's out and out dishonesty. The path of development of these tree-clearing laws to this point is littered with the Beattie Government's broken promises.

Mr Sullivan interjected.

Mr Seeney interjected.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms Nelson-Carr): I ask the member for Callide and the member for Chermside to step outside and continue their discussion.

Mr BORBIDGE: It started right back in the lead-up to the 1998 State election, when the then Opposition Leader, the member for Brisbane Central, launched Labor's environment policy that said his Government would—

"Examine the scope for a variety of incentives for landowners to enter into voluntary conservation agreements and nature covenants over their private land."

Those were the words of the Premier. What happened? The Premier welshed on his election promise and instead introduced the mandatory tree-clearing restrictions that we debate today.

Then there was the Premier's claim that he was forced to introduce his laws to prevent even tougher restrictions taking effect under the Commonwealth's Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act. What was the truth? Senator Hill told the Senate in February that land clearing was not included in the Act as a matter of national environmental significance that would allow the Commonwealth to intervene. He said it purposely was not included after negotiations with the States because the responsibility for land-clearing legislation should clearly remain with the States; in the case of Queensland, with Queensland.

Then there was the claim that these laws were needed because of severe salinity concerns in Queensland within the next 20 years. But the Natural Resources Minister had to admit that there was no scientific data at that stage to indicate the extent of any salinity problems. With the release of the draft salinity strategy by the Murray-Darling Basin Commission just this week, the Minister had to again admit that he got it wrong, that his claims were out by as much as 20 or 30 years.

Mr Welford: You can't tell the truth. Tell the truth for a change.

Mr BORBIDGE: The Minister is a dud, d-u-d, and what is more, he is destroying the viability of tens of thousands of Queensland farmers.

Mr Welford: Tell the truth.

Mr BORBIDGE: Fancy a member of this Government saying that we should tell the truth—the pack of rorters opposite who cheated their way into office!

Then there was the Premier's assurance that the new tree-clearing restrictions in the Vegetation Management Act would not be applied to applications that had been made to clear vegetation on leasehold land under the previous permit system. The Premier's office even issued a media release which said so but which later had to be retracted when the controls were brought in for leasehold land and applied to all those existing applications made under the previous rules. Lie after lie after lie after lie. That is the benchmark of this Government and everyone who comprises it.

Then there was the secret DPI report which costed the impact of the Vegetation Management Act at over half a billion dollars. Does the Minister remember that one? It was the report that shot holes right through this legislation. It was the report he scuttled off to Cabinet to hide from the public.

Then there was the claim that the new tree-clearing laws were about protecting the environment and farmers' futures—a furphy that was later exposed at Winton, when the Premier told a delegation of land-holders from Aramac that he wanted to get elected again, and no Government, especially his, could do so without the green vote.

That brings me to the daddy lie of them all: the promise made at the Winton Cabinet meeting and again at Roma. I wonder whether the Premier remembers it. He should, because he promised Queensland land-holders that he would not proclaim the Vegetation Management Act on freehold land without a compensation package. Another lie! That was the promise that the Natural Resources Minister reiterated in the 1999 Estimates committee hearings, when, after questioning by the member for Keppel, he said—

"As I have done in my discussions with rural industry in relation to water resource issues and the outcome of the catchment planning and water allocation management planning process, we intend to put together a substantial industry package in consultation with industry to ensure that any adjustments under any changed guidelines that impact on the business viability of rural primary producers will be addressed. We acknowledge that a decent incentives package is required and our State will play its part."

They are the Minister's words, and they amount to another broken promise. Here we are debating amendments to the Vegetation Management Bill that will see the Premier and his Natural Resources Minister break yet another promise and proclaim these tree-clearing laws with regard to endangered vegetation on freehold land in a week's time without compensation, without incentives,

without any regard whatsoever for the very real financial impact that the restrictions included in the Vegetation Management Act and this Bill will have on hardworking land-holders all over Queensland. This is being done in total ignorance of the realities of land management in this State. For instance, much of the clearing that takes place in Queensland is in fact regrowth control and that regrowth control is a very necessary management tool used in order to maintain a property's viability. The Government is acting seemingly in complete oblivion to the fact that these laws will force people off their properties.

Allow me to read to this Chamber just one of the hundreds of letters that my office has received on this issue, a letter that captures the feelings of land-holders all over the State regarding this legislation, the Beattie Government and the Beattie Government's abysmal, disgraceful, inept and incompetent Natural Resources Minister. It states—

"Dear sir, please find enclosed listing of our property 'Moonya', The Gums (FOR SALE). It is now open, for any one Member of the Government, or Government, including (Mr Beattie), to purchase.

It is a place that will return to natural scrub and forest in a few years.

Timbers are brigalow, belah, lime bush, iron bark, brushwood, and lots of others, varieties of wattle, turkey bush and others, no need to be replanted.

As we tried to keep regrowth down to sell 'Moonya', now, because of what is going on in Government, stopping us from keeping regrowth under control.

Also a large variety of wild life kangaroo's, wild pigs, foxes, hares, etc, also snakes & lizards.

Yours faithfully,

Property Owners

M C Linke L Linke."

Those words are a plea from the bush that the Minister has ignored, a plea from the people he has declared war on.

What this Minister is doing with this legislation is making the divide between the city and the bush greater than ever, because either through hostility or ignorance or being held captive to the Greens on deals that were done prior to the last election, he is destroying families, destroying family incomes and destroying family farms. This Minister is a wrecker and a destroyer. He should hang his head in shame for the lies that have been told by the Government on this issue. That letter is just one of many that have been received by my office and the offices of my colleagues. I note that those people have written to the Premier. I suspect that they will not be getting a response. It is definitely one of the more dispassionate letters. Many of these people are out-and-out desperate with worry as to how these laws will impact on their viability, the value of their properties and their futures.

Mr Lester: Suicides and everything are increasing.

Mr BORBIDGE: As the honourable member for Keppel said, the suicide rate, which is already bad, is a matter of grave concern. Many of these people are doing it very tough, and what the Minister is doing with this legislation is a disgrace.

The Opposition remains completely opposed to the Government's Vegetation Management Act. It remains appalled at the manner in which the Beattie Government has developed these laws in isolation and without consulting the people who actually own the land over which these laws will dictate new draconian management terms. However, we also acknowledge that the Premier and this Labor Government are wedded to this Bill regardless of its impact on land-holders and seemingly regardless of the impact on the Government itself—which is somewhat surprising, because the Beattie Government is hardly in a position where it can afford to generate any further unnecessary electoral baggage.

If this Government remains committed to this flawed legislation, we in Opposition remain committed to reminding the Government of its promises. The Premier has tried to make a lot of his apparent honouring of his commitment to land-holders at the Roma Cabinet meeting to amend the Vegetation Management Bill to remove the reference to so-called "of concern" vegetation. He has tried to sell it as a win for land-holders and in doing so he has tried to deflect attention from his other commitment at Roma and Winton, which was to provide compensation for freehold land-holders before proclaiming the Vegetation Management Bill. He has tried to deflect land-holders' attention because, with the passage of this amendment Bill and its proclamation next week, he will have broken yet another promise and lumbered rural and regional Queensland with a massive cost burden.

Quite aside from that promise, what the Premier is effectively trying to do is to make one small group of the community shoulder the cost of his Government's environmental objectives. Regardless of however flawed these laws may be, it is unjust and unfair to expect one group of the community—in

this case freehold landowners—to pick up the tab for the introduction of laws that are purported to be in the best interests of the general community.

The Opposition firmly believes that, if the State deems it necessary to restrict or resume the property rights of someone or a group of people, then it is only right and proper that the State compensates those people appropriately. That is not a new principle; that is not an outlandish principle. It is a principle that Governments, generally speaking, have abided by in a whole manner of situations such as land resumptions for the construction of roads, dams and so on. That principle has never been betrayed as it is being betrayed by this Minister, this Premier and this Government. It is a principle with regard to which the Vegetation Management Advisory Committee made unanimous recommendations. That group was composed of not only land-holders but also local government representatives and representatives from environmental groups as well. It is a principle that all the stakeholders in this issue still hold to.

So regardless of any of these amendments, regardless of any claims by the Premier that removing the provisions regarding "of concern" vegetation has somehow compensated for all his other commitments, none of the stakeholders can support this Bill or, indeed, the Vegetation Management Act. Why? Because the Beattie Government has not just broken its promise to compensate those land-holders who will be hurt by this Bill; it has squibbed on the fundamental principle that the State should share the costs of compliance with the State's own demands.

This Chamber does not have to take my word for it. I have already outlined the extent of the opposition to this plan by individual land-holders. Allow me to provide honourable members with some further insight on the extent of opposition to this Bill and these amendments by quoting a few of the reactions from some of the State's leading farming organisations, organisations that had previously indicated they were prepared to offer at least a modicum of support for the Beattie Government's moves on tree clearing as long as provision was made for compensation. This is what the Queensland Farmers Federation had to say—

"As an initial comment, QFF remains strongly opposed to the Vegetation Management Act 1999 and State policy for vegetation management on freehold land (August 2000 version). In the absence of any commitment by the State Government to compensating farmers for the resulting loss of value of their asset this is an issue we cannot step aside from."

Even the Canegrowers' Harry Bonanno came out to slam what the Innisfail Advocate reported as the Beattie Government's latest turn-about on tree clearing in a report this week. This is what that report said—

"Canegrowers' chairman Harry Bonanno said he was amazed and disturbed at the apparent dismissal of the rights of freehold landholders embodied in the Government's proposed amendment of the Vegetation Management Act 1999.

He said the proposed changes made the legislation unworkable, leaving canegrowers with no option but to oppose it publicly.

In a letter sent to State Premier Peter Beattie, Mr Bonanno expressed concern that the Vegetation Management Act 1999 could be proclaimed without any provision for compensation for landholders adversely affected by the new rules.

Queensland primary producers with endangered ecosystems on their farms will be forced to retain these habitat types at their own cost for the benefit of the entire community, regardless of their farm business plan.

This is grossly unfair.

In other States where legislation of this type has been introduced, the State Government has provided compensation.

The Queensland Government has clearly abrogated its responsibilities in this matter."

The opposition is pretty clear. These organisations were prepared to work with the Minister in good faith. Groups were prepared to give up some ground to help achieve the Government's objectives in return for some accommodation by the Government of the very real costs of achieving those objectives. With those sorts of reactions from organisations that were previously prepared to accommodate the Beattie Government's objectives, we may only begin to gauge the anger that is brewing among the grassroots land-holders right across rural and regional Queensland. The land-holders are going to have to wear the cost of this Government's punitive tree-clearing laws.

As I stated earlier, the coalition remains completely opposed to the Beattie Government's vegetation management legislation. As the shadow Minister has indicated, we will be moving a series of amendments aimed at improving the Bill—at least to some extent, if we get the opportunity. But just as the Minister cowardly gagged the debate on the last sitting day of last year, he has cowardly gagged this debate this time around. The Minister is a political coward who will not face the music.