



Speech by

Hon. RUSSELL COOPER

MEMBER FOR CROWS NEST

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VEGETATION MANAGEMENT AMENDMENT BILL

Hon. T. R. COOPER (Crows Nest—NPA) (5.35 p.m.) I, too, want to add some comments to what has already been said. I am fully aware that others from this side of the House want to make a contribution. Again, it is unfortunate that, on an issue so serious and so important as this, we are yet again facing the guillotine, as happened earlier with the Water Bill.

Both of these pieces of legislation have a huge impact on people in rural and regional Queensland. What worries me is that those on the other side of the House, for whatever reason, do not really have a deep understanding of what they are doing to people in regional and rural Queensland. That is what fills us with concern, because there will be this feel-good type of situation. Those opposite feel that they have done well in the RFA, and it is a disaster. They feel that they have done well on the Water Bill, which is a disaster, and they feel that they are doing well in this Vegetation Management Act, which is another disaster for the rural community, who do not need this legislation. Most in the bush have demonstrated very clearly that they want to leave the land in a better state than that in which they found it and that they can do that by sheer experience and education rather than by legislation. That is why this Bill is so totally unnecessary. It is pure politics being played to convince the city vote and the green vote that great gains are being made. I worry about the after-effects of these various pieces of legislation on the future of Queensland agriculture. That is what concerns members on this side of the Chamber greatly.

It is also a slap in the face for rural people, an implication that they do not know what they are doing. They have had vast experience—generations of experience—in managing the land and they know that they can do it a darn sight better than anyone opposite and those who will be responsible for carrying out the provisions of this legislation. Those on the regional committees that we have heard about and the departmental people, who have not had that practical experience, are going to assert themselves over people who have had that experience and have that genuine love and affection for the land but who also at the same time know how to be productive.

Mr Lester: The regional committees are a bit of a problem, too.

Mr COOPER: I mentioned the regional committees because they will act, in many respects, like tin gods giving their advice and employing delaying tactics and so on in order to prevent the progress of people who genuinely want to make their land more productive. The sight that we have all seen on television is very good at conveying the political spin. It depicts the same tractors, the same chains and the same trees being pulled over and over and over again, giving the impression—

Mr Pearce: The same thing is happening, isn't it?

Mr COOPER: No. It depicts the same tractor, the same chain, and the same trees. People get the impression that there is this continual clearing of land, and it is simply not true. A lot of land is being cleared, as we have said before, as a result of panic clearing and so on, but this is grossly exaggerated. It is so unfair because people in the cities get the wrong impression. What we want them to have is an honest impression of what is going on.

As the member for Fitzroy knows, I have been involved in the land for quite a deal of time myself. Frankly, I am going back there. I am looking forward to it very much. I know very well that I am one of those who treats the land with the utmost respect and have taken great care in the clearing and

the planting of trees and so on on my place. I have done that by learning from people who have been there before and done that. I will now go back and have to go through all this bureaucratic red tape tangle that is simply not necessary and I will have to go cap in hand to bureaucrats and pay \$250 for a permit that I might get to enable me to carry on my business. I will suffer from the red tape tangle that is simply not necessary.

Dr Prenzler: I wonder how long it will take you to get your permit.

Mr COOPER: That is the worry, because all these maps, plans and regional committees have to be set up, and that will take two or three years at least. This Bill will have an impact on productivity and therefore on the employment of people; it will be an impact on the people who vote for those opposite as well as for us. The Water Bill and this Vegetation Management Amendment Bill will affect the same people right across-the-board. As I said, these Bills are simply not necessary; they have been introduced to convince some that the Government is doing something and to please the city people, who will not be affected by this Bill.

In relation to the requirements for permits to clear, it has now been revealed that any landholder wishing to clear vegetation on leasehold or freehold land would have to apply to the DNR or, in some cases, would have to go to their local authority for a permit regardless of whether the vegetation is classed as of concern or not of concern. So even if the vegetation is not of concern, freehold landholders are still going to have to get a permit. The \$250 fee is one thing; the delay is another. At least land-holders can proceed with clearing regrowth, as well as clearing for fence lines and firebreaks. Quite frankly, that is only commonsense, anyway.

As I have said, I am mindful of the time because this debate is being gagged again which, therefore, means that members are not going to be able to express themselves in the way they would wish. As I say, the after-effect of this legislation is that, when it is put into action, everything goes dead. The legislation has been passed, the hype and publicity goes away and the people are left to suffer. That is what is so cruel. It is timely to remind members that we on this side of the House in Government will make major changes to this legislation and, if not, repeal it. We stand for voluntary guidelines. We stand for putting faith and trust in the people who are very good managers and know what they are doing and working with them and educating them. If the Government did that, it would gain those people's respect and cooperation. However, if the Government puts in this legislation, the people will hate it forever. That is why the land, the jobs, the productivity and everything else will suffer as a result of this stupid piece of legislation.

As we know, back in December 1999 the first Vegetation Management Bill was passed. We also know that for quite some time leasehold land had been regulated under a system of regional tree-clearing guidelines. However, as we also know, those guidelines were replaced with the Vegetation Management Act. The VMA was also intended to protect endangered and of concern vegetation on freehold land. Under that Act, vegetation is regarded as endangered when less than 10% of its pre-clearing extent, that is pre-1788 levels—if we can work that out—remains or when 10% to 30% remains but covers less than 10,000 hectares. Vegetation is regarded as of concern or vulnerable when 10% to 30% of its pre-clearing extent remains or when over 30% remains but covers less than 10,000 hectares.

That is the sort of stuff that these regional committees have to sort out. Members can imagine how much time that is going to take when people want to get a permit and get on with the job of improving their productivity. The VMA also provides for the protection of land declared by the Minister for Natural Resources as vulnerable to degradation or having high conservation values. Regrowth control will be prohibited in such declared areas. Under that Act, regrowth is defined as vegetation that is less than 70% of its undisturbed virgin height and less than 50% of its undisturbed canopy cover.

As the member for Burnett pointed out, regrowth grows as thick as hairs on a cat's back. It is far, far thicker and more difficult to control than what was there in the first place. The land simply cannot be allowed to go back to that state. Once the land has been cleared, people cannot clear it again; the cost is enormous. People must be able to keep that regrowth under control. However, someone is going to have to decide whether that regrowth is less than 70% of its undisturbed virgin height and less than 50% of its undisturbed virgin canopy cover. By the time that is worked out, the regrowth will be out of control. That is just too stupid for words.

The legislation states further that clearing will also be prohibited within 200 metres of rivers, 50 metres of creeks and 20 metres of gullies. Tree clearing on freehold land will now be an assessable activity under the Integrated Planning Act. We know that this Government has suspended the maximum 60-day time limit that usually applies for the assessment of applications under the IPA. So there are further delays. In terms of clearing being limited to 50 metres on either side of creeks and 20 metres of gullies, in some of this country there are gullies running through it. If 20 metres either side of the gully is preserved, it will preclude people from being able to carry on doing their usual tree-clearing exercise, their productivity exercise.

The red tape that is going to be involved in this legislation is going to be prohibitive. All land-holders will have to apply to the DNR or local government for a permit to clear leasehold or freehold land regardless of the vegetation category, that is, endangered, of concern, or not of concern. Really, land-holders are now very much left in a cleft stick. It is just a pity that more members opposite are not able to get out a little more often into these areas that are affected by the legislation that they introduce. That is the worry. Often members opposite never know about the cause and effect of the legislation that they introduce. They introduce the legislation, it gives them that warm and fuzzy feeling, but members on this side and the people who live in those regional areas have to live with the after-effects of it.

I will not go on, because I know that other members wish to speak. I believe that on many occasions I have made my point about this legislation. I know that there are members opposite, including the Deputy Speaker, the member for Logan, who make an effort to try to understand the effects of the legislation that is introduced by the Government on the people who have to live with it. I can only encourage more members opposite to do that and to try to understand and watch the effects of this legislation. Through their weight of numbers, this legislation will be passed. We are all fully aware of that. However, once that is done, I ask members opposite to keep an eye on it and listen to members on this side and other people who know about the various adverse effects of this legislation so that, at least while they are still in Government, amendments can be made to it to try to make it work. I encourage members opposite to do that because, as I said, members on this side know the adverse effect that this legislation will have on our people. It is going to hurt.
