



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR TABLELANDS

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NATURE CONSERVATION AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr NELSON (Tablelands—IND) (4.17 p.m.): This Bill and others like it are always going to be contentious in communities because we all have different opinions about and different ideas on nature conservation and the issues that surround it. Regardless of other members' opinions, the electorate of Tablelands, which I represent, is the most scenically spectacular part of Queensland. The area of Cairns and its hinterland represents ecological diversity that is unsurpassed in the rest of this State. The only other area of this State that could come close would be the Lamington National Park. Even that does not have the biodiversity that the rainforests on the Atherton Tablelands have, nor does it have the scenic beauty of the areas many members in this House have alluded to—areas around Ravenshoe, Millaa Millaa and Malanda—

Ms Boyle: Or the interesting and diverse people who live there.

Mr NELSON: Yes, or the very interesting and very diverse people who live there. One of the interesting points raised in the House by other members relates to the type of people who live in the Ravenshoe area and their use of the rainforests within the Palmerston National Park, or whatever they call it now, and the areas around it. Many members have alluded to the simple fact that timber-getters have been going into these timber areas for in some cases 100 years and taking timber out on a sustainable basis.

It is a bit of an urban legend in Ravenshoe that when then Senator Richardson was narrowly escaping lynching in that township he actually gave a speech about the pristine rainforest whilst standing on the stump of a 100-year old tree that somebody had cut down. The point is that he was talking about an area of land that has now been heritage listed, yet it was heritage listed after it had been sustainably logged.

Mr Lucas: I think that is hypocrisy rather than urban myth.

Mr NELSON: I do not know if it is true or not, but many people have put it to me that he gave his speech from a stump of what he thought was a naturally fallen tree.

The point that has been raised with me by many people who worked as timber-getters in the rainforest areas around the tablelands and in the Cairns region is that they used to be able to go into those areas and take timber and not damage the ecology, or they did not damage it to the extent that it was excluded from heritage listing at a later date. That is an undeniable fact. These areas are heritage listed. I drive through them daily. The member for Cairns and the member for Barron River would also be able to testify to the fact that these areas are now heritage listed. But they were logged up until the stage that they were heritage listed. That is a very interesting point. As far as I know, Fraser Island is in the same position. The member for Maryborough just made that point.

As far as I am concerned, we have to learn a lesson from that. The fact is that these areas can be sustainably harvested and maintain their integrity as a naturally beautiful place and as an area that can be of cultural and natural value in the future. That can be done if you have a certain amount of knowledge and a certain amount of person-power to do it. The simple fact is that this issue is not addressed on many occasions when people consult radical organisations such as the green groups that run around proclaiming to have a complete and utter monopoly on commonsense when it comes to managing the rainforest. I know quite a few of those old timber-getters. Some of them are well into

their eighties. They know a hell of a lot more about the rainforest than some of these greenies could ever hope to know.

Dr Clark: Some of those people said they were being logged in an unsustainable fashion. You just don't know.

Mr NELSON: The member for Barron River is correct. I have no doubt that some parts of that country were logged in an unsustainable manner. I have travelled through those parts, and that is true. There are parts throughout Australia that have been logged in a very unsustainable manner by unscrupulous people who were doing it for complete and utter financial gain. But when you are talking about the hardwood timber areas such as red cedar and the areas where I live, they can and have been logged sustainably in the past, and that is the truth. That is undeniable, because they were heritage listed, and one does not heritage list something that does not have a natural heritage value.

One only has to read through the documents that came under heritage listing to see why these areas were heritage listed. If someone compares those areas to the ones that were logged, they will see that they are exactly the same. I ask anyone who can disprove that to stand in this House and say so. That is what has been put to me, and my research shows that that is the truth. Maybe the Minister can make a statement on that, because it is the truth. These areas were sustainably logged in and around Ravenshoe, and then they were heritage listed. That is why people ended up losing their jobs. I have no doubt that those people lost their jobs, because I have spoken to them personally, and they have taken me to the areas that they logged right up until the closing date when they could no longer log.

I am entering into this debate out of a sense of wanting to try to get somewhere, because the point is that we do need—and this is where I would totally agree with the member for Barron River—to look after our natural environment, because it is what makes our part of the world beautiful; it is what makes our part of the world the special place that it is. If we do not maintain our environment in a very careful manner, we can lose it, because it is also very delicate. Even though those rainforests are magnificent, tall, amazing structures that are totally awe inspiring when you walk through them, they are incredibly delicate and they can be destroyed at a moment's notice.

One perfect example of this would be Lake Eacham. Many members have been there, and it would come as quite a surprise to some people that it used to have a township around it. The area was mined for gold and was completely clear felled. There were no trees around Lake Eacham. I have the photos in my office if people would like to see them. I will email them to anyone who wants to see them. Lake Eacham is once again a national park that is completely forested.

Some of the most beautiful forests in the area are to be found around Lake Eacham, and they have attracted wildlife such as cassowaries, which are highly endangered in the areas in which we live. However, that land has been restored to a level at which it can be included in a heritage listing register. I am not saying that we should clear-fell forest because we can replant it in the future. What I am saying is that in many cases when conservationists campaign in what starts out as an earnest and rightful attempt to maintain our environments, they sometimes get a little bit too carried away in their agenda.

A point that the member for Barron River might like to dwell on is the fact that at one stage many greenies very much derided the Skyrail project. I remember them chaining themselves to trees protesting against that project. Yet now it is winning awards because it is an environmentally friendly tourist venture that is doing wonders for Kuranda and Cairns. This is the point that has to be made when we are talking about nature conservation. There are groups whose agenda may be righteous, but they go about it in the wrong way, and their manner is totally exclusive of any other opinion. As with most socialist organisations, they have to work in a vacuum because they cannot accept any criticism of their agenda.

My point is that in considering a sustainable way of managing our natural resources—and this Government has made that one of its main focus points in rural and regional areas of Queensland—everyone has to be included in that agenda, not just one or two elements. Natural resources exist for a reason. The very name of the portfolio should suggest to us that these things are natural resources; they are resources that a State can use to generate wealth. Wealth can be generated from a national park in the form of tourism. Again, the national parks in the tablelands and in Cairns and its surrounding areas are a perfect example of the way a natural resource can be used to generate wealth, yet not use it to generate a primary resource or a primary industry in doing so. That is true, and I will not debate that.

As I said before, there are some areas that should be untouchable and should be prevented from ever being logged. Those areas would include places that need to be protected because of especially significant species or species that are endangered. But when we are looking at the areas that do not come under that category, there is a buffer zone where we have areas of natural resources that can be sustainably logged and provide income not only in the form of immediate jobs and security for

people in industries but also income for the State into the future. This has to be taken into consideration.

It is no good locking up natural resources for a future that we may not have, because what we are doing by locking up our natural resources and taking away people's ability to work and their ability to develop a corporate knowledge of how to sustainably log a rainforest is guaranteeing—and this is where the Minister should really think about it—that in 10, 15, 20 or 50 years' time those resources will be used in an unsustainable manner, because the particular State or country will have become so destitute because of the lack of access to natural resources that it will have to take those natural resources in order to gain some sort of income for itself. These are issues that are not being addressed by carte blanche restrictions placed over natural resources.

The Government is not addressing the fact that by impoverishing industries now, it is guaranteeing that their future will be unsustainable. No matter what we do now, in the future our natural resources will dictate how much wealth this State will have. That is in fact happening right now. States and countries are judged on the level of natural resources to which they have access and the fluidity of them and how much they can put onto a market. One only needs to go as far as the stock market at the moment to see gold prices and the Australian dollar and all these issues that are affecting us, but they are mainly being generated by our ability to take out our natural resources and market them in a sustainable manner.

I think there are some very laudable points in the Bill. It is beyond a shadow of a doubt that we need to have areas of natural importance or ecological importance reserved so that the ecology of the area can be maintained in the future. That is a given. But at the same time something needs to be done to look at how to manage those resources so that we get the best out of them on both scales. I will outline a perfect example of how we can do that. Given the technologies that we have now—biotechnologies and the replantation of forest areas, etc.—one thing that is happening a lot in north Queensland is that people are replanting whole blocks of their land with trees, whether it is a 50-acre block or a 100-acre block. They are encouraging those trees to grow—let us say, for example, it is a predominant species of red cedar—so that they can use them in the future as an asset that they will be able to log and sell and pass on to their children as almost a form of superannuation.

For example, if it is a 100-acre block, it puts 100 acres of good land under trees—trees that are native to the area, trees that will attract native animals to come and live in them and trees that will be able to be used to absorb carbon and all those sorts of things. They are trees that will be very, very beneficial to the environment in which they are planted. That, in my opinion, is an excellent thing to do. I know plenty of people who have done this. The idea is that in the future they will be able to go into these blocks—for example, the 100 acres of red cedar mixed with other species growing there—and either take a tree here and there and sell them to supplement their income or, as I said, sell it as a block as a sort of superannuation policy.

The growing of timber is an excellent example of an excellent way of using a natural resource. All we have to do is look at this building we are standing in. Nowadays the cost of taking the timber used to build buildings like this would be incomparable. To build an entire house out of red cedar now would be nigh on impossible, but 50 years ago it was the done thing because red cedar was much more readily available than it is now.

What I am saying is that we can have these areas of rainforest; as long as they are managed sustainably and looked after by the right sort of people they will be able to be logged into the future. The taking of one red cedar tree out of an area to thin that part of the country is something that happens naturally, anyway. The member for Barron River has left the Chamber, but she would be able to give testimony to the damage cyclones do to these rainforests. One only needs to drive from Mareeba to Cairns to see the damage caused to rainforests. The Police Minister would probably not agree with me because, in his opinion, cyclones do not cross the range, but one needs only to drive down that part of the road to see the damage that a cyclone has done there in removing a massive amount of timber, timber that will be very hard to replace within the next 50 years.

Another issue I want to raise in relation to this Bill—it is the prime one for me—is the managing of our natural resources and national parks as they stand at the moment. It does not take a brain surgeon to realise that some of these areas, for example some of the areas on the cape like the Heathlands National Park and the Lakelands National Park, are immense areas to cover. There are huge stretches of national park and it would take teams of people to manage and keep them properly.

I have provided a letter to the Minister about the culling of pigs in national parks, an issue that has been raised by all members who have spoken in this debate. Feral pigs do more damage than any logger could ever do in a million years. In some cases they do as much damage as a bulldozer. Again, I offer any person here who denies this fact a free airfare and a drive in my car to show them some of the damage pigs do in my electorate. It is immense. Feral pigs are like little bulldozers going through natural rainforests. Not only do they do that, but they destroy clutches of cassowary eggs.

Mr Reynolds interjected.

Mr NELSON: For the member for Townsville it would be a bus fare.

The point of the matter is that these things need to be addressed. The management of our national parks is very important. Maybe if he was in another arena the Minister might agree with me that more money needs to be spent on the management of our national parks to make sure that the rangers not only have the abilities to manage these areas but also the resources to do so. There was a suggestion—it is not my suggestion, it is an idea borrowed from South Australia—that the sporting shooters clubs of Queensland would be able to help in cleansing some of our national parks of this horrid pest, the feral pig. That would be a very good idea, especially when we are looking at the whole idea of managing these national resources at the best level.

At the moment I do not believe that our national parks are sufficiently manned and I do not believe that the manpower there has the expertise to do the jobs that are asked of it. Much more training, much more time and much more effort must be spent on maintaining the national parks and areas of heritage listing that we already have. I have been to parts of the Palmerston that are now completely choked with lantana that were not choked while loggers were in there. That is because loggers would take a day or two off in every six to cut down lantana patches and to shoot pigs inside their logging area. This is not fiction; it is fact. They would look after the areas that they logged because their livelihoods depended on it. If they destroyed the natural ecology they would not be able to log trees in that area in the future.

Again, if the Minister or anybody else on the other side of the House would like it, I will take them to talk to the people I have spoken to. It would be very enlightening for them to do so. As far as I am concerned, these people are the ultimate conservationists because they have derived a livelihood from maintaining a forest that could produce giant red cedar trees or giant kauri pines. Their very livelihoods depended on the health of that ecosystem. That is something that the radical elements of the green movement do not understand, or do not want to understand. Locking an area of forest away will eventually destroy it, whether it be choked with weeds or choked by feral pests.

Again, all it would take would be a short trip through the Palmerston or any of those other areas of north Queensland that were locked up by Senator Richardson to see the damage that is done by lantana and feral pests such as pigs and cats. I again encourage anyone to go and do that, because ultimately it is not good enough to lock these areas up and say, "Here we are. We have set aside this massive block of land. Aren't we wonderful? Isn't this a great thing for our future?" It will not be a great thing for our future unless it is managed properly. It will not be a great thing for anyone if it is managed inadequately or if it does not have sufficient funding allocated to it so that it can be a natural resource 100, 200 or 300 years from now. Whether that natural resource is used for tourism or logging, the issue is the same.

Having said that, I would like this issue to have been debated in a more professional manner but, unfortunately, people have conflicting ideologies. Suffice to say that ultimately the people on the ground are the ones who will suffer, like they did at Ravenshoe and like they do in other areas in the State. This Bill is not helping anyone; it is certainly not helping our prosperity as a nation. It is poor nations that destroy their environments because they cannot afford the luxury of environmentalism. We are—or were—a wealthy nation and this has enabled us to protect our environment. But we will not continue to be a wealthy nation if we stop our people from being able to use our natural resources in a professional and wise manner. By doing that, we are inevitably condemning our natural resources to extermination because we will end up a poor nation that cannot afford the luxury of environmentalism.

Time expired.
