



Speech by

Hon. V. LESTER

MEMBER FOR KEPPEL

Hansard 17 May 2000

NATIONAL PARK ESTATE

Hon. V. P. LESTER (Keppel—NPA) (5.57 p.m.): I move—

"That this House deplores the lack of resourcing of the national park estate, as detailed in the recent damning report by the Local Government Association of Queensland."

Right from the start it needs to be made clear that a glance at Labor's record shows the following—

- a \$28.4m cut in the environment budget in 1999-2000;

- one in five regional jobs left vacant;

- only \$72,000 allocated to maintaining 7.1 million hectares of parks and reserves;

- \$9.44m spent buying more land for national parks in 1998-99;

- \$5m spent on consultancies in 1998-99;

- 160 jobs created in the Brisbane bureaucracy over and above budget forecasts—all at the expense of national parks.

The Beattie Government slashed \$28.4m from the Environmental Protection Agency and Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service in its 1999-2000 State Budget. Queensland's 7.1 million hectare national park and reserve network and regional Environmental Protection Agency offices have borne the brunt of these environment budget cuts. Earlier this year, one job in every five was vacant in regional EPA and QPWS offices. The budget cuts and understaffing in the regions have prevented the agencies from doing their jobs.

Regular complaints are received of feral pig, weed and rubbish problems in national parks. Infrastructure is not being maintained and there is a very severe shortage of park rangers. The Beattie Government has not been able to maintain existing parks and reserves, but it has spent nearly \$9.5m in the last year purchasing thousands more hectares of land to add to the network. It simply means that the Minister is able to tear out to one of these places in the Government jet or whatever, take a couple of reporters with him, have a photograph taken and come back to the Courier-Mail and forget all about what he has been out there to do.

Even after the Budget cuts, the QPWS was allocated \$135m in the current Budget, but in its submission to the Local Government Association of Queensland national parks inquiry, the Queensland Rangers Association stated that only \$72,000 had been allocated to park maintenance. The inquiry heard that the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service had been forced to partly fund maintenance programs by raiding—this is what little kids do—up to one third of its capital works budget, which had been slashed from \$10m to just \$4m in this financial year. Rangers and regional staff have been discouraged from working overtime. In one case funding shortages stopped rangers attending a bushfire which burnt out a large area of Tregole National Park in south-west Queensland.

Meanwhile the Beattie Government has bolstered the Brisbane based EPA bureaucracy at these regions' expense. The Queensland Nationals exposed the fact that the EPA spent nearly \$5m on consultancies in 1998-99 and appointed 160 staff over and above the previous year's budget forecast, but none of that increase, of course, was for rangers.

Queensland national parks have suffered at Labor's neglect. The topic of resourcing of the national park system was one that was raised by a significant number of submissions and in comments made to the public hearings of the Local Government Association's public hearings. The position

expressed was that the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service was substantially underresourced relative to the significant expansion in park areas and was unable to effectively provide the required level of development or maintenance of the park system. Some international and interstate comparisons were provided for the inquiry. In its submission, Carter, Hockings and Baxter stated—

"... Australia, at US\$359 per sq km, spends less on protected area management than any comparable developed nation. We invest less than half as much as New Zealand and a third as much as Canada."

Bearing in mind that we are not too good nationally, let us come back to Queensland. In terms of interstate investment in protected area management, the submission goes on—

"... Queensland has the second lowest investment per capita and the third lowest per hectare investment."

Comparative data sourced from the ANZECC benchmarking project confirms this comment and also shows that Queensland has the lowest expenditure per visitor. So that is not really good, either.

Mr Welford: What did you do about it?

Mr LESTER: What the Minister is doing about it is what matters.

Mr Welford: What did you do about it when you were in Government?

Mr LESTER: What is the Minister doing about it?

Mr Welford: You did nothing.

Mr LESTER: He is just sitting there talking and trying to shout me down. He has not done a damned thing about it. He has really made a mess of it. He has been an abject failure as far as national parks and wildlife is concerned. He has not been able to do the job; he has not been able to fight for the money. He has been done over every time. He has been king-hit. That is what has happened to him: he has been king-hit in the Cabinet. He can carry on all he likes, but that is the story.

The QPWS provided some additional data on trends in a number of key indicators and suggested that on a per hectare basis park management expenditure increased by 35% over the four-year period shown. That is what the Minister has said, but the figure does not reconcile with other QPWS data where the QPWS recurrent expenditure over the same period grew by only 4%. His own department cannot do its own accounting. These difficulties in obtaining an accurate picture of the funding for national parks suggest an urgent need to upgrade internal accounting as well as public reporting. So he did not do really well at that, either.

A 7% real growth in funding from 1993 to 1999 is small when compared with the 28% increase in managed area over the same period and the 60% increase in national park areas for the 1991 to 1998 period. It is pretty horrific stuff here and it is not really good. It does not augur well for this Government's efforts in trying to give people free and decent access into national parks in Queensland. The number of rangers employed in 1999 was—

Mr Lucas interjected.

Mr LESTER: There is no point in trying to stop me. These figures are dynamite as far as the members opposite are concerned.

In 1999 the number of rangers employed was 372, only marginally greater than in 1993. What do members opposite say about that? Mirani Shire Council said—

"... inadequate funding of National Parks which, in the case of Eungella, has over the past few years seen a degrading of the park so that it is now an embarrassment to many people who rely on tourism for their livelihood."

Human resource matters are also a key consideration in effective park management. It was suggested to the inquiry that there had been a significant drop in morale within the QPWS. I can assure honourable members that that is the case; they are not really happy at all and they are pretty willing to tell me about it. They are pretty willing to tell me that the Minister does not visit them too often and they cannot get to him when he does.

It is very interesting to know that the Minister made a few comments earlier when I was speaking, but he got done over like a dinner and he has not made any comment since. Time is running out, so he does not have much time in which to make comments. I assume what I said is absolutely real and truthful. The Minister has not been able to comment one way or the other.

The Queensland Rangers Association state—

"... current general staffing levels are not in place to fulfil the basic legislative requirements"—
and that is what they are telling me—

"of protected area management. Inadequate staffing levels exacerbate safety problems, create unsustainable workloads and generate low morale and personnel problems."

Time expired.