



Speech by

Mrs D. PRATT

MEMBER FOR BARAMBAH

Hansard 2 May 2001

VEGETATION MANAGEMENT

Mrs PRATT (Nanango—Ind) (6.02 p.m.): I move—

That this House recognise and acknowledge the negative impact the Vegetation Management Act has had on those people who invested in timber as a revenue source and give consideration to—

- (1) reviewing the current legislation to allow limited timber harvesting to an average income per annum;
- (2) pay compensation for loss of revenue; or
- (3) purchase those areas designated for preservation.

I move this motion to ensure that the situation facing the victims from vegetation management, regional forest agreements and various other forms of legislation are not forgotten. As time moves on they should not be swept under the carpet and forgotten. Because these people are a minority, it is too easy to sacrifice these few for the many and not address their very real concerns.

I listened to the debate in the House today on the industrial relations bill and watched how vigorously the government fought to protect what it believed was some encroachment on workers' rights, which would perhaps reflect badly on their superannuation. The government should be given due credit for protecting workers' remuneration. Yet where legislation attacks rural land-holders and removes their ability to maintain and grow what was virtually to be their self-funded retirement package and/or superannuation, nothing happens. Where is the righteous indignation from these government members? Where is the support for these rural and regional workers from, as several Labor ministers were happy to proclaim this morning, the self-proclaimed party for the bush? Why is it always rural and regional areas and occupations which continually bear the brunt of legislation without any defence of the victims' rights or the so-called underdogs when it comes to fighting against these bills—the underdogs the Labor Party prides itself on protecting?

The sustainable management of Queensland's native vegetation is vital for protecting our unique biodiversity and to ensure the long-term productivity and profitability of Queensland and Australian industries as a whole. No-one disputes this, although many would dispute the manner of achieving the best outcome. These acts are supposed to provide a clear guide to ensure our land is sustained for generations to come. Again, no-one would knock that ideal.

Despite the legislation's good intentions, it is very clear that farmers, graziers, timberworkers and millers have all lost the right to utilise portions of their freehold land, whether it be for grazing, timber or farming. For some it has dulled what had been and could have been a bright future.

Irrespective of a person's support for or against the original pieces of legislation, what we have here is a situation where legislation has affected people adversely. This legislation has been passed in this House and these people are asking for our help. They are asking for a solution to a problem with which they have been inflicted and which has a totally different outcome on their lives than the one for which they had carefully planned and prepared. For many of these people who are in the autumn years of their lives, this is an unkind and unnecessary impost.

I would like to read a letter from one of the people affected by this and other forms of legislation. The letter states—

We are a small family sawmilling company established in the late 1940's and were entirely dependent on private stands of timber for our log supplies until acquiring an allocation of 107 cubic metre's of logs per annum from dpi forestry reducing our dependence on private log supply to a limited degree but to remain viable we still have to source a further five to six hundred metre's per annum from private supply.

With the introduction of the government tree clearing and environment protection legislation we are finding it increasingly difficult to obtain sufficient log supplies from private sources. Without sufficient private timber we are in a position where our livelihood as sawmillers is under threat.

Although the State Government is committed to ensure supply of all allocations for the next 25 years our small allocation 107 cubic metres per annum was of little value without the availability of additional private supply.

This considered we have sold our allocation to another Sawmilling Company after the Government exercised their first right of refusal.

Our projected business plan was to buy land which had established stands of natural timber of which we have over the years purchased approximately 150 hectares of natural forest containing millable timber and during the final years of our working life cut the millable timber from said land which we commenced to do three years ago and to then sell the land (we have had some extremely good offers over the years) to fund our retirement. To present we have cut all millable trees from one 70-hectare property.

However with the introduction of Government land clearing legislation we have been told by the department of natural resources the land is in an area that is totally protected from land clearing thereby negating our business plan of selling the land and funding our retirement. We are in effect left with land we can not clear so making the possibilities of selling unlikely.

Government is quite clear on the requirements of land holders regarding land clearing and the penalties imposed for violation of legislation but offer no solutions or help to landholders who have no say in the land yet have to pay local council rates on land that has become unprofitable to own.

This man has been told by the Department of Natural Resources that he is in a declared area which cannot be clear-felled and therefore his chance to sell at the price he could have reasonably expected is no more. There have been instances where the Department of Natural Resources staff have in fact informed land-holders that they were in declared areas when they were not. This is misinformation which has caused much unnecessary distress to many families, individuals and businesses. On occasions, DNR staff have misinformed landowners—now more rare than in the past, I admit—and they need to be fully aware of the pain and distress their words sometimes inflict.

A prime example is the situation in which a number of families invested all their savings and superannuation into buying large properties. One couple in the South Burnett region paid \$1 million for the freehold land and the timber rights. Such a price was justified at the time, as the amount of millable timber on the property was only about half cut. Their intention was to run cattle at a low stocking rate and practice silviculture and thus improve their country and make a sustainable and environmentally responsible income.

Governments sold the people the land that is timbered and all the rights and title will be freehold. These people bought believing, as they were told from childhood onwards, that freehold country is sacrosanct. People have paid premium prices to the government for their right to freehold and now the government has taken away that right to do what they need or what they want to do inside their boundary fence.

The problem for these families is that they have spent their savings and superannuation. They were hoping to be self-funded retirees. They wanted to sell the land to provide for their superannuation. Some of these people are losing a substantial amount of money. Their companies are no longer viable and their businesses will soon have to be closed down. The original plans for most of these people are now unlikely to succeed, as the land that is unable to be cleared for agricultural purposes is very unlikely to sell. These property owners are also left with council rates of many thousands of dollars each year for land that is virtually controlled by the state. They have become government caretakers without pay.

The Vegetation Management Act and other acts have had a disastrous effect on many people. Not only has productivity on their land decreased, their retirement funds have all gone up in smoke and they are left with many extra bills that small incomes and pensions cannot cover. Almost all of the people who own freehold land have no intention of clearing their land of trees recklessly. However, they demand the right to farm them and utilise them as they see fit without interference from anyone who has made zero input into the production of those trees. They cannot grow trees without some expense in the way of lost income from other aspects of their farming operations. This used to be compensated in some form or other from the production of the trees.

I acknowledge the importance of trees to the environment. However, I believe that there are other ways of achieving the aim of having trees other than through the current vegetation management legislation. I have no doubt that the government members, with their overwhelming numbers of support staff, will have worked diligently to negate arguments put forward by the supporters of this motion. However, the truth remains the same. Legislation relating to vegetation management, the RFA, the dairy deregulation and other similar matters has been passed in this House. Such legislation hurts people—sometimes a lot of people, sometimes only a few. No matter which way we look at it, those people who have been affected have had their retirement funds, their investments, their superannuation virtually stolen away from them. Such negative outcomes of legislation, whether that be to the dairy, pastoral, timber or any other industry, needs to be addressed.
