



Speech by

HOWARD HOBBS

MEMBER FOR WARREGO

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LAND CLEARING

Mr HOBBS (Warrego—NPA) (12.19 p.m.): I wish to inform Queenslanders of the underhanded and sneaky way this Labor government is using the court system to harass land-holders and rural workers. I am pleased that the Minister for Natural Resources is in the chamber. I hope he sees this as a genuine effort by me to explain some of these issues.

Department of Natural Resources enforcement officers are using every trick in the book to secure convictions for breaches of the Vegetation Management Act and are taking advantage of the good nature and hospitality of country people. No-one would support the irresponsible management of our land. Land-holders go through a careful and responsible process to obtain a vegetation management permit. I refer to one example where the land-holder did everything he could to comply with the process. He states—

During July August and early September 2000, there was a lot of media and press releases from the Government with regard to implementing tree clearing guidelines, and that a permit would be required to clear native vegetation on all land including freehold land.

We were intending to pull some virgin timber around this time and had asked a neighbour to work with us where we had our own dozer and they provided the other to pull about 1,000 acres. I was concerned about the media releasing details of what was to come, being the Proclamation of the Vegetation Management Act of Parliament.

Prior to this date I was liaising with senior officers of the Department of Natural Resources and Mines (D.N.R.) in Roma, Dalby, and Warwick, with regard to what to do if the legislation was introduced whilst we were pulling. We wanted to pull approximately 1,000 acres and had the opportunity to do this; as a neighbour was travelling home through our property with their dozers and we could hire one of theirs to pull with our own machine. We had these senior officers visit our property at an earlier date, when they actually drew up a tree-clearing plan for the whole of our property with our assistance, long before it was a requirement from D.N.R.

They all indicated to me in their own words to keep pulling as we had a plan and that we were pulling within their guidelines and that there was no timber species that was endangered and that a permit would be approved anyway. These D.N.R. personnel had not been briefed on what procedures were required, being what forms would need to be supplied or any details whatsoever with regard to making an application to clear. In other words there was total confusion in D.N.R. for a month as to what was required. A permit would be approved if and when it was required to clear according to our Tree Clearing Plan. They did suggest that if we had a break down or got wet weather to hold off and apply for a permit. I made notes in my Diary of these phone calls.

We started pulling on 15 September and later we found out on the news that the Vegetation Management Act was proclaimed in parliament and that there were restrictions on tree clearing in Queensland.

In February 2002 I had a phone call from D.N.R. requesting a meeting with me at our property to discuss anomalies with the tree clearing maps. I agreed to meet with them on the next day to what I thought was to correct some anomalies with their maps. I felt that they needed my help as I have lived here all of my life, and I was made to think that they needed my assistance, knowing my local knowledge of the district. How wrong was I. Two of them came out and I invited them in to our home and made them a cup of tea and they produced maps and started questioning me and it was after about two hours that I realised things were not right when I was asked for my drivers licence to identify myself. I then realised that he was talking into a tape recorder and that I had told him things that did not relate to the original investigation. I was not made aware that our conversation was being recorded.

This has led to me being charged for Tree Clearing without a Permit for clearing 49.7 H.A. of the 1,000 acres. Technically, we were clearing without a permit for the few days to complete the 1,000 acres, because of their inefficiencies of not being able to issue a permit. I was in fact consulting with them to prevent exactly what has happened.

This is all happening at a time when we are under a lot of stress with the drought and the extra work and worry to keep our cattle alive and maintaining the viability of the property. We have had a lot of extra expenditure because we have had to lay about 14 km of poly pipe to provide water for our cattle. We have never been in water trouble before in all of the big droughts in the past, and now we have twelve out of sixteen dams dry, some of which have never looked like going dry in the past. In a drought like this we are so busy just ensuring our cattle survive without the stress and expenditure a court case can bring with it ... they have not provided us with the evidence they are bringing against me, which by law they are required to do. It is all delaying tactics to cost more and bully small people like me to plead guilty, pay the fine and become an environmental vandal that the Government can use in their Statistics.

The issue here is that the land-holder could be facing court costs in excess of \$100,000 without the case going to an appeal. If it does, those costs could double. Not one endangered tree was destroyed and he had an appropriate plan at the time.