



Speech by

**Mrs D. PRATT**

**MEMBER FOR NANANGO**

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Hansard 13 March 2003

**NATURAL RESOURCES AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

**Mrs PRATT** (Nanango—Ind) (4.05 p.m.): I rise to speak briefly to the Natural Resources and Other Legislation Bill 2003, which proposes to amend five pieces of legislation: the Mineral Resources Act 1989, the Environmental Protection Act 1994, the Vegetation Management Act 1999, the Land Act 1994 and the Integrated Planning Act 1997. The minister's second reading speech stated that the legislation would deal with two issues. The first is 'the scourge of illegal clearing'.

I would like to congratulate the government on this part of the bill because it is about time the government recognised that it is, in the main, totally responsible for the current situation regarding land clearing problems in Queensland. This government has been unable to understand the real issues of land management in rural areas and has not been prepared to converse with those who could help.

The government must take a lot of responsibility for tree clearing because the government did not make it very clear in the beginning as to what was expected of property owners. I am not sure whether at the time the government knew exactly what it was asking of them, either. If it did, it failed dismally to convey it to landowners. At the time, it was stated that a person could not clear designated areas on their properties if they were identified as designated endangered areas containing certain species or land subject to possible erosion or salinity.

The difficulty for many land-holders at the time was that they were unable to access any definitive maps because groundtruthing had not taken place. I still have doubts about how much groundtruthing has been done, and I will be interested to know from the minister how far that has gone. When seeking information from councils, land-holders very much prepared to do the right thing were left in the dark because the councils could not supply relevant information because they could not get the relevant information from DNR. Worse still, the staff of the Department of Natural Resources did not even know themselves, or, if they said they did, as occurred in a couple of cases, different departmental staff gave conflicting information. So there is no doubt that people were very, very confused.

People who had selectively cleared land over long periods of time to conform to a long-term strategy to manage their resource panicked. Government stampeded these land-holders because it did not take the time to consult properly or explain properly what it had in mind and why it had it in mind. The government just took a blanket approach and said, 'This is what we are going to do and basically you will accept it.' There was no consultation. In fact, the government by its very actions went out of its way to offend land-holders by implying that they were inefficient and environmental vandals when these land-holders are predominantly good managers and would have backed the government to the hilt if they had been included and not excluded as if they were uneducated imbeciles.

These land-holders could and would have helped to mark out vulnerable areas on their properties. In fact, many were actively working on preserving certain areas of their properties long before this bit of legislation was passed. In the beginning, many actually assisted DNR officers, only to find themselves under suspicion and facing penalties. There is not a single land-holder who does not understand that in their field, just as in parliament and in every other industry, there are 'cowboys', people who give the industry a bad name. Most land-holders would love to help the government expel them from the land. Most people realise that the directions given to their grandparents by governments to 'clear the land or lose it' were incorrect and over time have strived to replant trees to ensure that erosion is halted and that further erosion does not occur. As I said, this action started long before it

became popular. A member stated that she and others had planted an awful lot of trees and felt that their efforts were wasted. I assure that member that in the Kingaroy area there are plenty of land-holders who have re-treed their entire properties. Maps from only 30 years ago show the hills barren of any trees whatsoever. But if we look at photos today, these areas are beautiful and green and covered in trees.

Unfortunately, many people were told that large sections of their properties consisted of endangered vegetation zones. This did in fact render their properties useless in terms of the purpose for which they had purchased them. Therefore, what they saw for their monetary future was a pretty poor outcome, because these people had actually purchased these timbered areas for their retirement. Although many understood and supported the issue the Vegetation Management Act was hoping to address, it did not ease the feeling that they had just been robbed of their future. Naturally, they wanted to avoid that kind of future or be compensated for it, but at the time that was not on the government's agenda. No compensation that I have heard of was offered. I was pleased to read in the second reading speech that—

This legislation will not change the way we determine what land can be cleared and neither will it impose any new restrictions on land-holders' ability to legally clear their land.

I hope time will prove that that is in fact true. Many people are still unsure of their positions under the Vegetation Management Act, and at the time of the passage of the tree clearing legislation many were reassured that the treed properties they had purchased would not be affected. I now find that some of these same people are receiving a letter saying that they can no longer harvest these trees. To them, it appears the government just moves the goalposts at every turn.

I agree that we should not clear indiscriminately and that a harsh penalty should apply to those who do. The point is that every case must be looked at individually and realistically and perhaps the time should be taken to really show them why that clearing should not take place. The government's approach to proper land management has, at times, been misguided and ill-informed. In other cases, perhaps knee-jerk reactions have compounded what has caused the current dilemma. For instance, the government issued a map of restricted areas in south-east Queensland where vegetation was at risk. If it had actually taken the time to look at these areas of concern, it would have realised that a lot of those protected areas were in fact regrowth areas. To date, there are areas in many parts of Queensland that I know nobody has actually looked at at all. There are many areas that have been classed as at risk. I ask the minister to please ensure that these at-risk areas are properly designated.

The incompetent way the government has approached the subject has sometimes been really quite appalling and, as I stated before, led to panic clearing. It is just like a rumour involving a bank nearing bankruptcy. The first reaction is to take our money out of the bank and protect ourselves at all costs. For some people, that is their exact attitude to land clearing: 'We will get it done now and sneak it in.' They do not realise that, with the satellite mapping and everything else, a tiny flame can be pinpointed. As much as we try to tell them that that can happen, without the actual visual aid on a computer screen they are not convinced at all.

Under modern farming practices, a property owner is more aware than ever of the importance of not abusing the land. In today's modern farming community, land management is an important part of any successful property management. I believe that most of them do it very well. I say 'most' because there are cowboys and renegades. Erosion, soil degradation and salinity problems are part of the management of any property.

When we consider tree clearing, I ask the government to look along the coast and at the urban backyard. To me, the ultimate vandalism occurs in those areas. I travel the coast quite often and I see hectare after hectare of scrub and coastal tree areas being 'vandalised' by property developers with an eye for the almighty dollar but no regard for erosion and other issues addressed in this bill. These areas just become irrelevant because they can be hidden under tar and cement. When we look at the coast, these areas are under a lot of pressure. We continually hear people saying, 'Our resources are becoming more limited.' One area where I grew up was lush and beautiful. Never in my lifetime or that of my parents were there water restrictions or such issues. Now, they continually take place. The resources on the coastal strip are just as badly affected as those out west. Unfortunately, the actions of developers attract very few detractors and seem to be okay with governments. A huge increase in land taxes and associated developmental costs soothes political palms, it would seem.

The Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast are just typical examples of the continual destruction of coastal vegetation areas. I really would like to see more protests against such situations. How are these areas ever going to compensate for the massive tree clearing taking place here, with the housing developments on such small blocks of land that there is very little land left even to plant a tree? Who is to blame for excess clearing? I know. I am told all the time in this House and in media reports—the bush vandals. I do not agree. We all are responsible—every single individual.

I also question the figure of 61,000 hectares that is identified as illegal clearing. Over the last few years with the drought I have seen a lot of trees suffer dieback. It was quite oppressive. I had never

seen it before and I hope to heavens I never see it again—trees dying one by one, totally denuded of any leaf structure at all. A lot of bush was trimmed to feed stock. Lots of fires took out a number of hectares of scrub.

I do question that figure of 61,000 hectares. I am sure there are many more farmers and landholders complying with the VMA since its introduction than the government thinks. Again, I believe this piece of legislation is aimed at the bush and perhaps unintentionally is another kick for rural property owners. I do believe, along with the government, that we now know the effects of salinity, of indiscriminate clearing. I also admit that we have to be very careful in terms of how we handle our resources. I am in two minds about this bill. I will continue to listen to the debate and shall make my final decision at the end of the debate.