



Speech by

HOWARD HOBBS

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Hansard 29 May 2003

VEGETATION [APPLICATION FOR CLEARING] BILL

Mr HOBBS (Warrego—NPA) (3.45 p.m.): Today I am pleased to speak to the Vegetation (Application for Clearing) Bill 2003. I do not really believe that the government needed this legislation to put in place the moratorium that it has announced. I would like someone to explain to me why that is required when a regulation or a cabinet decision should be able to be made. Perhaps there is some good reason for that. If so, I would certainly like to hear it.

The explanatory notes give the reasons for the bill and state that the 'scientific evidence clearly shows that land clearing poses a grave threat to Australia's environment through the contribution to salinity, declining water quality and species extinction'. I thought to myself, 'Haven't I heard that before somewhere?' I think we heard that in respect of Cubbie Station, the salinity threats, the big red maps for the Condamine-Balonne, the Murray-Darling Basin and other catchments. Can honourable members guess what happened when that science from the government was challenged? It was proved to be wrong.

Mr Seeney: Hype.

Mr HOBBS: It was government hype designed to frighten people who did not understand it. When the independent panel was put together to look at declining water quality, what did it find? It found that the river was healthy, that it was not degraded. The minister is not even in the House, so perhaps somebody else could tell us where these areas of severe salinity are. We know that in some areas clearing will contribute to salinity. However, today people cannot get a permit where there is a salinity problem. That is under the existing rules. The explanatory notes also refer to species extinction. Can somebody please name the species that have gone?

Ms Nolan: It doesn't look like the dodo has.

Mr HOBBS: That interjection deserves a response. It is a good indication of the intelligence of government members. I do not believe that anyone can name the extinct species. We hear about them all the time. Everybody talks about extinct species. But I challenge someone to name them. That would be fantastic. Then we might have a little truth in environmental science. In the past, the government has been very loose with the truth in relation to environmental issues.

The moratorium was imposed with no consultation. As I understand the issue, the Premier—or somebody—was a bit loose with the truth with the Prime Minister as well. The way I understand it, the Prime Minister was obviously convinced that this was a good idea. But he wanted to have consultation first, not the moratorium first. So I think that he was a bit caught up in it there.

I want to refer to other temporary moratoriums that have been imposed in Queensland. The second last temporary moratorium that I was involved in was on the Condamine-Balonne in about 1998 in relation to water extraction. That moratorium continues. The last temporary moratorium in Queensland that I am aware of was also on the Condamine-Balonne in relation to development. It continues. So how long will this temporary moratorium stay? That is why it is important that we have a sunset clause to make sure that the science and the fiction do not get mixed up.

I turn now to greenhouse gas emissions. The Prime Minister is also indicating—the Premier has obviously convinced him—that we have to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The minister has also said that. One would think that the government would be very supportive of its own people. We should look after our own. In terms of meeting Australia's greenhouse gas commitments, I just do not see why

Queenslanders have to be the conscience of the rest of Australia. Quite clearly, no-one is going to sign up to the Kyoto protocol. George W. Bush is not going to sign up to it. Australia will not sign up to it. But we all want to work towards a sustainable outcome. If we are going to put up \$150 million—or whatever it is—it is a little bit short in relation to what is required.

So how do we determine what sort of compensation is required? I have numerous examples of where people have left a lot of their timber on their properties. It appears that they will not be getting any compensation at all for that. In Victoria, where all the land has been cleared—it is all gone—farmers are being paid to put trees back. Those people in Queensland who saw the writing on the wall and cleared probably more land than they could afford to—they cleared a lot of country—have had a win because they can develop their country, grow some grass and be productive. But those people who did the right thing and left their trees are being penalised. All they have are trees that are worth nothing, because they are not able to be harvested. Basically, it is timber that is worth nothing to them in that sense.

Mr Hayward: In what sense?

Mr HOBBS: In an economic sense. For instance, if a person has a property from which their main income is livestock production or maybe farming—

Mr Hayward: You knock down every tree.

Mr HOBBS: No, people should never knock down every tree. I am not saying that people should do that. But most people get down to about a 25 per cent or 30 per cent retention rate. A 30 per cent retention rate is, basically, what has been talked about. Most people would think that 25 per cent is better, but say it was a 30 per cent retention rate. We have people who have a 70 per cent retention rate on their places. Basically, the property—

Mr Hayward: That is what they do when they graze. That is their approach to grazing.

Mr HOBBS: No, it is not. You see, what happens is that the timber—

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms Jarratt): Order! Will the honourable member please speak through the chair.

Mr HOBBS: Absolutely. The issue is that the people who want to run their livestock on those sorts of properties are trying to develop it so that they have sufficient grass. But the timber thickens, and when it thickens those people cannot run as many cattle. So as time goes by, and people cannot thin their trees, they end up running fewer and fewer cattle.

The other day I visited a fellow called John Ford, who is a councillor on the Booringa Shire Council. He bought a block neighbouring his property. He thought that it would be good, because he could slowly undertake development on that place. This man is a really good manager. He is a member of all the environment groups and committees that we could possibly think of—the Murray-Darling Basin committee and consultative committee. John Ford is a very, very good farmer. He bought this block of land and then suddenly the powers that be decided that this block of land fell into the endangered category. It contained what is known as whip stick pine, which means very thin pine trees. They are as thick as the hairs on a cat's back. The country is totally useless. There is not one environmental aspect of that land that is any good. If anything, we could go back to that land in 20 years time and find that it would be the same. We could go back to that land in a further 20 years time and find that it is exactly the same. There is no grass, the soil runs off—there is nothing to hold it together.

People do not understand that we just cannot lock up land and expect it to be preserved in a condition better than it was before it was locked up. It does not work that way. All the science will tell members that a lot of these places that are just locked up lose more ecosystem than they would if they were managed properly. That is not understood.

When people apply for a tree clearing permit in Queensland, their property is examined and a 20-kilometre or 30-kilometre circle is drawn around it, even though they may have a retention rate of 70 per cent. However, if their neighbours had cleared their property and within that 20-kilometre or 30-kilometre circle there is less than a 30 per cent retention, those people cannot clear their land. Those people deserve compensation.

Another issue is that if Queenslanders are to be the conscience of the rest of Australia in relation to greenhouse gas emissions, then they should be able to have some tradeable right in this timber that they are forced to lock up. I am not talking about the last tree, or the bottom 30 per cent of the trees; I am talking about above the usual rate of retention that one would usually expect to be able to develop. That is the window of opportunity. People should have the right, if they wish to grow trees, to get some sort of carbon credit or whatever it is called. In relation to this issue, I am talking about a substantial amount of dollars in the long term. That issue certainly has not been canvassed sufficiently.

Another area that is particularly important is regrowth. I believe that the member for Callide raised this issue. The problem with regrowth—and it is still a problem even in terms of the government's definition—is that if people cannot afford, for whatever reason, to keep maintaining their regrowth and it

reaches above that category of 30 per cent in height or 70 per cent in canopy, it reverts to remnant vegetation. Even though people have taken a lot of time, effort and money to develop their land, if for whatever reason they then leave the land alone and a long time later find that it needs to be cleared again, they will find that they have lost the opportunity to do that. It will become useless land. In Queensland, that regrowth grows back thicker and faster than ever. There is an old rule in tree clearing: if you pull down one tree, 10 come to its funeral. That is what happens. The country becomes less and less productive.

Many years ago I bought a place out my way. It used to run quite a lot of stock. In fact, the mayor of the town used to own it. It was a lovely place. But in about the mid-1950s—in those big seasons—fires went through that property and all of this regrowth came up. The country could not run half the number of stock that it used to run. Previously, that country was lightly shaded, open downs country.

It was fully timbered when we bought it. We developed it and we got some buffel grass growing. The timber is still there and the washouts have been fixed up. It is a far better place than it was, but that is what happens if you leave it. It has to be managed. When the Aborigines were here—and quite frankly I do not think they actually were the best managers—the only tools they had were fire, but at least when the fire went through, they were able to do something with that country. All we are doing is replacing fire with bulldozers, but we have to be able to manage it. If we had been around in the days when they used to burn, we would be horrified because, as Captain Cook saw, there was just smoke up the whole east coast of Australia. That is what they used to do. They used to burn. It was uncontrolled burning. Imagine all the native plants and animals that would have died when those big bushfires got away.

It can at last be managed with dozers. It is the same with thinning. Country has to be thinned out. People should be able to go out there and thin it so it can be kept productive and the trees can be kept growing. It is the same with the silviculture in forestry. There is no way in the world that we should not be out there trying to encourage the best trees to grow and thinning out the ones that are not productive. That is what is done in many instances.

Another important issue is in relation to fodder clearing. The previous speaker, who has now left the chamber, gave the government a lot of praise in relation to fodder clearing. I notice in the explanatory notes it is said that the supply of fodder for stock in a drought declared area is okay to be done. That is fine, except for the fact that often the farmer has to start feeding the stock before the farmer can get a drought declaration. It is very hard today to get a drought declaration. A certain amount of stock has to be sold and then in many instances, for various reasons—there may be some rain in some parts of the country or the property or no rain in other parts or it might be storms coming in; it might be the right time of the year when it will rain and so you do not sell—feeding often has to be started before a farmer gets an official declaration because the stock has to be kept in good condition. You may want to try and make sure you can actually start to feed them because they may be calving or lambing and they need more protein, and because it is dry they have to be supplemented with licks and they may need some more fodder as well.

The government has not really picked up on the fact that there is a need in some instances to clear for fodder purposes before you have in your hand a drought declaration. I hope the minister is able to give us an answer on that because that is a very important one, and it is certainly a humane one as well. We do not want to be in a position where stock is left too long before—

Mr Malone: The RSPCA comes along and fines someone because they are too skinny.

Mr HOBBS: That is right. The member for Mirani says the RSPCA will come along. What we need is long-term planning. The government lost the plot for quite a while. How many years did it take to finally get across to this government that a tree clearing permit and a fodder permit were different? The government argued that the conservationists would see it that way. At last in the regional vegetation management plan I see they have decided to make them in different categories. That is right. That is good. That is the way it should be done.

The planning programs that have been put in place are good. They have to be there. People have to be involved, and that is why this whole thing now is absolutely ridiculous. The work of those vegetation groups is now totally lost because their work is finished in relation to endangered species because land cannot be cleared. A ban has been put on the old concern, therefore there is no more work the vegetation groups can do there. There is a moratorium and there is going to be a ban on species not of concern by 2006 with a limited amount of clearing. So there is nothing left for those groups to do in a sense. The government is really jumping over and ignoring all those thousands of hours of work that have been put in by those groups.

We all want a sustainable outcome. Nobody in their right mind would want to go out there and totally destroy the land. In every group there is always a cowboy. We accept that. It does not matter

what industry it is. Those examples cannot always be used as the norm because the majority of people out there are very good. The permits are pretty hard to get. People cannot just go out and clear.

Also, when the numbers are looked at, we see that the numbers have reduced dramatically. Maybe the minister would like to advise us of the number of applications for tree clearing he has received in the last few weeks, particularly in, say, the six months before the moratorium and the week before the moratorium. Those figures would be very interesting. If the minister cannot provide those figures, it would be good if he could tell us why he cannot provide those figures, because it is pretty important. I refer to the compensation principles. There is not anywhere near enough money to go around and do the job properly.