



Speech by

Mr L. SPRINGBORG

MEMBER FOR SOUTHERN DOWNS

Hansard 29 May 2003

VEGETATION [APPLICATION FOR CLEARING] BILL

Mr SPRINGBORG (Southern Downs—NPA) (Leader of the Opposition) (12.45 p.m.): I am not sure how I can follow that. Certainly that speech has broadened the debate. There is no doubt about that. The honourable member said that we are following in the footsteps of Earl Page. We are proud of that. We would be proud to follow in the footsteps of 'Black Jack' McEwen, Artie Fadden and all of those great National Party and Country Party leaders who have been synonymous with good governance in this country and in this state.

Those opposite are following in the footsteps of Gough Whitlam—sending the state broke! We have heard a whole lot of idealism from the member for Toowoomba North—flowery stuff about the future and so on. We all believe in that, too, but he does not have the practical understanding of it. Notwithstanding that the honourable member makes some excellent contributions in this place from time to time, this probably was not one of them. In terms of idealism it was probably okay but in terms of practicality it was not. Do honourable members know the other thing Gough Whitlam said?

Ms Barry: It's time.

Mr SPRINGBORG: It was certainly time. Four years after that it was time again. And didn't he get a wallop! We have been paying for it ever since.

The other thing he said was that if there are problems with regard to what we have to do in the country we do not need the farmers; we will just import the food. He said that. His view was that we could import the food. That is a view that permeates the minds of so many people on the other side of the House. The simple reality is that we live in a reasonably regulated economy and there is some basic fairness built in.

The other people in whose footsteps those opposite are following are Bannon, Cain and Kirner—all of those who sent their respective states broke. Quite frankly, this legislation is unnecessary. It is a stunt.

Mr Shine: You want us to spend more!

Mr SPRINGBORG: We want the government to administer it better, too. That is something it could take out of the books of some of our leaders. One thing the honourable the Premier has not taken out of the books of Sir Joh is proper administration of public moneys and public funds.

This legislation is a stunt. It is not necessary. If the government wants to impose a moratorium, the government has the capacity to do that administratively. That is a fact.

Mr Lawlor: Tell your mates in Canberra that.

Mr SPRINGBORG: I will come to my good friends in Canberra.

The reason this bill is unnecessary is that it is a diversion away from the domestic problems this government has. If those opposite believe they need to put in place legislation to achieve a moratorium on the processing of applications, then why did they not put legislation through parliament to achieve a moratorium on the processing of water licence applications in Queensland following ministerial agreement with regard to the Murray-Darling from 1994, with regard to licences which people had actually lodged at that time? People in my area still lodge applications for bore licences for irrigation.

Mr Lawlor interjected.

Mr SPRINGBORG: There is only one bore in Southport. There has been an administrative ban on the processing of bore licenses for irrigation purposes across my patch for a long time. They just are not processed. People can lodge them.

The reality is that what the government is trying to achieve is not necessary. I do not go to Canberra very often, but when I go there it is effective. Let me tell honourable members what was said today in *Country Life*, which is a very, very important publication—

Mr Cummins interjected.

Mr SPRINGBORG: That is fairly stinging from the honourable member for Kawana, but natural modesty precludes me from responding.

Mr Cummins: Go and have a look at the tape of Channel 10.

Mr SPRINGBORG: We have a look at a lot of tapes.

Mr Cummins: You would be proud of that.

Mr SPRINGBORG: The member should go and read some of his contributions in this parliament.

Country Life on page 4 says this regarding what I was able to achieve in Canberra—

And the hardball tactics appear to be working. Stung by the intensity of Mr Springborg's Monday night meeting, Mr Anderson stunned his colleagues including Prime Minister John Howard when he erupted at Tuesday morning's party room meeting in Canberra.

Insiders say Mr Howard was visibly rocked by claims from his Deputy Prime Minister that the Federal Government had been duped by the Beattie Government.

Mr Shine: Was there a reporter there, or did you feed him that rubbish?

Mr SPRINGBORG: No, certainly not. I am very happy to set the record straight, because the Premier does not know how the standing orders work in this place. I raised a number of matters in Canberra. The point of my visit was to discuss tree clearing and the sugar industry. I raised the issue of the Beattie government's duplicity over the handling of the Heiner matter. We had a discussion, as I said publicly, with regard to the hypocrisy of the Premier and the standards that he has expected of the Governor-General vis-a-vis the way he handled allegations.

Ms Liddy Clark: Relevance.

Mr SPRINGBORG: Well, the previous speaker spoke for a good 13 or 14 minutes and he did not even touch on the bill.

Mr Seeney: He did not even know the name of the bill.

Mr SPRINGBORG: He did not even know the name of it. He said that he had a rose garden, or something or other. That was his connection to vegetation.

This is not necessary because the reality is that, when the government imposes an administrative ban, that is never contested in court. If those opposite can tell me where the administrative bans are being placed with regard to licence applications for underground water and other water licences in areas where there has been a moratorium, then I am happy to say that we have a problem and we need the legislation. The honourable member, having a legal background, would be aware of the writ of mandamus. The writ of mandamus places an obligation on government to do what government should do, and that is process certain matters.

I would argue that, if that is their motivation for doing this, then their motivation is inconsistent with what they have done in Queensland with regard to other caps and moratoriums where no court issue has arisen with regard to the administrative processing of licence applications which have been made or permit applications which have been made in situations where other moratoriums have been put in place. It is not necessary. The reason that the writ of mandamus is very rarely, if ever, invoked is the simple fact that nobody can afford to do so. Nobody ever wins. If there is a problem, it can be addressed by legislation.

This is a diversion and it is not necessary. Quite frankly, when I explained the situation in Queensland to my colleagues the other night regarding what had happened administratively, they were surprised. I am sure that, during the consultations between the Queensland and federal governments, the issue of what had been practised in Queensland in not processing licences in situations where there had been moratoriums relating to natural resource management had not been effectively explained to the Commonwealth. It was quite apparent to me that they were unaware of what had happened in this state. The whole thing is to make this a parliamentary issue, a public issue, when it does not need to be.

The other issue is the way that this government has gone behind the backs of farmers in this state at a time when those farmers and graziers were negotiating and working with them on the regional vegetation management planning process, which has been a very difficult process for these people over the last two or three years. The government has been going behind their backs and putting

a number of proposals to the Commonwealth with regard to the complete phase-out of remnant vegetation clearing in Queensland.

I have also seen a copy of a letter from the Premier to the Prime Minister which made it quite clear that the state government has gone further on remnant vegetation than the federal government wanted it to. I have a copy of that section of the letter. It is not a private, confidential document. The Premier tabled in the parliament earlier in the week this correspondence between him and the Prime Minister. The letters that we have are a matter of public record, but they make interesting reading because significant points are made in them.

It is the false premise under which this whole matter started that is the real concern for farmers. Many of them are saying to me that they have been through this regional vegetation management planning, or RVMP, process over the last two to three years, they have got to a draft form, they are almost at a conclusion and, in many cases, they have acknowledged and have in place a regime where there will be no clearing of remnant vegetation, and that is based on the retention in those areas.

I am sure that honourable members who do not deal with this issue day to day are unaware of the great work which these committees have done under extremely difficult circumstances. I am sure that many members of this parliament simply believe what is being tossed up to them—that is, the whole state is being bulldozed and burned. It is not. There has not been an enormous amount of tree clearing in this state in recent times. There has been very little illegal tree clearing because that is currently regulated, and those people are being prosecuted. What happens in Queensland at the moment is regulated under this government's regime, which significantly reduces any capacity for clearing of vegetation, full stop. If it is endangered, it cannot be cleared, whether it is freehold or leasehold. If it is of concern, it can only be applied for on freehold land. On leasehold land it cannot be. Other areas are regulated within the framework.

In my area committees have informed me that there will be virtually no clearing of remnant vegetation to the extent that on the Granite Belt—and I am sure the minister has heard about this—there is a problem now with regard to areas needed for vineyards. That is a practical issue resulting from this legislation. That is a high growth, high value production industry. Under this proposed model, there is more significant curtailing of that industry across Queensland, because to date the principles which have been agreed to exclude that.

The other issue is: why does Queensland—the most underdeveloped state—have to be the social conscience for the rest of Australia? In New South Wales and Victoria, where there is not much vegetation left, people can still apply to clear remnant vegetation on a not insignificant scale.

Mr McNamara: Two wrongs do not make a right.

Mr SPRINGBORG: It is not an issue of being wrong; it is what is practical and scientifically based. The member comes into this place and talks about science and research, but what is being proposed here does not take those particular matters into consideration. We had a scientific approach. We had some problems with the legislation that his government brought in. We accept that it is the framework that we now have to work within. But it is another thing to go along and say, 'We have a framework that is virtually going to go out the window if this new regime comes in because there is no need to regulate remnant vegetation.'

Those opposite say that there might be some role for salinity. On the issue of salinity, we are not the troglodytes that people allege. We are concerned about salinity. However, what needs to be understood is that salinity is an issue in certain places and it needs to be targeted in those places. In some areas it will not be a problem; in other areas it will be a significant problem.

Mrs Carryn Sullivan: It is an environmental problem caused by land clearing.

Mr SPRINGBORG: Land clearing can be a part of it. I would ask the honourable member for Pumicestone if she is aware of the research that has been done with regard to perennial grasses, which are having a greater effect in terms of dealing with salinity and reducing the water table than woody vegetation. That is also a fact. All I am saying is that there is a lot of emotion in the community about this debate. It is very easy to make people scapegoats and to put laws in place to do things which are fundamentally unfair. Perhaps the motivation might be idealistic in that people think they are doing something right, but the impact can be much greater. Our other concern relates to the issue of compensation. There are no compensation provisions for the existing laws which have been introduced in Queensland, which, by the government's own estimation, three years ago were \$500,000 million. That was taken to cabinet and was excluded from the public domain.

I am sure that the shadow minister indicated our position during his contribution to this debate—that is, we will support a moratorium as long as it is not on the never-never and as long as there is a sunset clause of three to four months. Otherwise we will have a circumstance like the moratoriums that have existed with regard to the taking of water in the Murray-Darling, a situation which has been going on since 1994.