



Speech by

Mr N. ROBERTS

MEMBER FOR NUDGE

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VEGETATION MANAGEMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr NEIL ROBERTS (Nudgee—ALP) (12.36 p.m.): At the outset, I want to congratulate the minister and his department on this achievement of bringing this important bill before parliament. The whole issue of tree clearing has been quite a significant and difficult one for the government and, judging by the contributions to this debate, it is clear that it is one that invokes very strong views on both sides of the House.

During the recent election campaign—I recall the day very clearly—I returned to my office and pulled off my fax machine a joint media release from the Wilderness Society, the Queensland Conservation Council and the World Wide Fund for Nature that outlined their views on the government's proposal to outlaw broadscale clearing. I think it is fair to say that traditionally these organisations have been very hard markers when it comes to decisions of government, particularly Labor governments, on environmental issues. But within this joint media release was the statement describing this decision to end broadscale clearing of remnant vegetation as the most significant environmental decision in Queensland's history. For such groups to jointly put out a press release I think underlines the significance and importance of the government's decision. In terms of the government's focus on this issue, that was also underlined by its commitment to proceed with this proposal, underpinned with a commitment to a \$150 million assistance package for those land-holders who would be affected by the decision with or without the assistance of the federal government.

In this debate, many other speakers have outlined specific elements of the bill and I do not intend go into a lot of detail on those issues. I simply wanted to take the opportunity to place on record my support for what I believe is a significant decision that will be looked upon by future generations as a turning point in Queensland's environmental history. There is no doubt that the implementation of these reforms will have some difficulties for some land-holders. In a sense, the financial assistance package is in recognition of that—to assist those land-holders where there will be some impact. Certainly, we hope that the federal government comes to the party at some stage and shoulders its share of the required compensation to land-holders.

The bill puts in place some quite practical and workable solutions and responses to what is a very urgent problem. I read in the explanatory notes some information that essentially summarised the fact that the scientific arguments supporting this move have been overwhelming and show clearly that inappropriate land clearing over the last century did pose a serious threat to Australia's environment through its contribution to species extinction, salinity, declining water quality and so on.

It was an issue that all sides of the House recognised government needed to make some clear decisions on. Additionally, and quite significantly, at the time that the government announced the moratorium on tree clearing in May last year, that activity accounted for around 12 per cent of all greenhouse gas emissions within Australia. Despite what many members have said, particularly those in the National Party, this issue is not about demonising land-holders. In fact, I agree with some of the comments made about the responsible approach that many land-holders have towards conservation and looking after the asset that is their land that they currently farm or is included in their property.

There are many members on my father's side of the family who are still on the land, and I know from my experience with them that they are very responsible and recognise the fact that if they do not look after the land they do not have a future income. It is not about demonising land-holders, it is not about putting in place a regime that will put land-holders out of business; it is about a workable and

sustainable plan to ensure the future of rural industries in the state by protecting the very asset that land-holders rely upon, and that is the sustainability of their land holdings.

I am proud to stand here in support of this bill. I note also the Liberal Party's support of the bill and I am disappointed that none of them are here to hear what I am about to say. I welcome their support of the bill. However, I do not have a lot of confidence in their maintaining their position on this issue. I recall in the last term, at least for the first two years, the Liberal Party distinguished themselves—and I say that in a sense of separating themselves out in terms of some policy issue—from the National Party on key issues, one of which was tree clearing. It has done that again in the debate on this bill. However, we all know what will happen if and when the Liberal and National Party ever return to government. The fact of the matter is they will have to enter into another coalition agreement, because the reality for the Liberal Party and its new members is that they can never, ever govern in this state without a coalition with the National Party.

When it comes to significant issues like tree clearing, let us have a look at what they agreed to in the 12 months before the last election, because this is the real testing time for the Liberal Party—once they get the whiff of an election and the possibility of returning to the leather benches on the government's side. This is what they agreed to in the last coalition agreement, and it encompasses this issue of land clearing, gun control, et cetera. They signed an agreement which says—

Each member of the Parties, their State candidates and Office Bearers will support and advocate Coalition policy both inside the Parliament and elsewhere. No Member of either Party shall advocate in the name of his or her Party, policies that differ in substance from coalition policy.

The reality on the tree clearing issue is, despite what the Liberal Party say in this chamber today, we know perfectly well that when and if they ever return to government, whether it be before the election or after, they will return to the fold with the National Party, they will be dominated by the numbers in the National Party and they will revert back to National Party policy when it comes to the issue of tree clearing. I want to again acknowledge the significant efforts of the minister, his staff and the department in putting this bill together for the government and I commend the bill to the House.