



Speech by

Fiona Simpson

MEMBER FOR MAROOCHYDORE

Hansard Thursday, 6 October 2005

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Miss SIMPSON (Maroochydore—NPA) (11.47 am): This is an omnibus bill. It covers a number of provisions. However, I wish to address one particular environmental issue. As a horse rider, I have to declare an interest in this parliament in ensuring that the voice of those who responsibly use forest trails is heard. They are requesting that this Beattie Labor government's extreme approach to locking out recreational users is overturned. These horse riders have been offered crumbs from the table of government as an alternative, but the deadline to get out has not been removed; just delayed in some areas.

The government's heavy-handed approach to banning horse riders and beekeepers from lands which have traditionally been forestry reserves and which now have been converted to national park status is draconian and unreasonable. It is a move which is based on a wrong premise: that these activities are not compatible with conservation in our national parks. Meanwhile real environmental threats from feral animals and weed infestations are left virtually unchecked in national parks throughout Queensland. Why have feral pest and weed infestations been left unchecked? Because that would require some on-the-ground management and funds from a government which could not manage a chook raffle. Labor governments are good at creating new laws and red tape but not terribly good at practical management issues.

The member for Toowoomba South and other coalition MPs outlined the importance of sustainable forestry practices with selective logging in well-managed forestry areas and proper fire management. They also spoke about the risk of extreme fires ripping through these areas as they are progressively shut down. However, the ears of government members are closed. They do not want to listen to those who have voiced well-reasoned fears, but the fires will come and, tragically, beautiful forestry land and fauna will be destroyed and human lives will be put at risk.

Labor is not practical. It has forgotten about commonsense. I raise the issue of the importance for recreational users to gain access to national parks. That access has really been put into a very small box by this government. A number of Labor MPs have said how hard they are negotiating with a number of these recreational users who now face their current access to the trails being denied. I note how hard it has been for those who have engaged in this practice for over 100 years in some cases—they have responsibly used these trails—to suddenly be treated like vermin. They have been told that they are environmental vandals by riding those trails.

I am not advocating for horse riders to go off trails and through sensitive areas. We are talking about access to trails that have been available for well over 100 years. Now these people have to negotiate for the crumbs in terms of access. They are being caught up in this process, desperate for access to existing trails. They are being made to feel like they have to fight for access to something they have passionately looked after for well over 100 years.

Ms Molloy interjected.

Miss SIMPSON: I heard the member for Noosa say 'no'. These people have been passionately looking after these areas. I think the member should realise that they are responsible when they access these trails. They resent being painted as environmental vandals. I think that is unfortunate, naive and insulting.

Labor is not practical. Already during this parliamentary sittings we have heard about the mismanagement of the Fire Ant Eradication Program by the Beattie government. These disastrous pests have spread beyond the areas to which they were allegedly contained. The issue is currently being investigated by the Crime and Misconduct Commission. We have also heard about the tragic and criminal mismanagement of the Queensland health system that has potentially seen more people killed or maimed than at Port Arthur by a mad gunman. However, more is going to be heard about the environmental failures of this government, which is making decisions based not upon scientific advice and evidence but upon backroom political deals.

The Beattie government has claimed that horses and beekeepers are environmental vandals. The government has talked about providing alternative trails. Thus far, some of the alternative trails are a pathetic example of how little this government understands about safe horse riding. Trails suggested by the government have included lands which are underwater and beside busy roads. I would suggest to government members that trail riding underwater is not a very viable option and riding beside busy roads is extremely dangerous. Even when riding horses that are relatively used to traffic there are significant risks. However, those risks are unacceptable when it comes to children riding horses in those circumstances. Yet this has been part of the alternatives suggested by the government.

During a community cabinet, I remember riding through the heart of Caboolture with horse riders who were protesting the government's moves to shut their forest from trail riding. We had marshals to ensure some distance between horses and traffic. The horses we were on were pretty good. However, well-meaning drivers of passing cars kept beeping their horns and yelling out their support. The drivers meant well, but this can make even a calm horse very skittish. It highlights that cars and horses do not mix.

But what of the forests that are being locked up? We are not asking that horses be allowed to roam free through sensitive areas; we are asking for existing defined trails to be available for horse riders. Not only are these trails of benefit to those who passionately love their forest and enjoy them on horseback; they are also access points which are often fire breaks. It is absolutely magical to ride through the Australian bush. It sure beats riding around and around a paddock. Even a horse would die of boredom. Is that what government members expect horse riders to do? Problems with access to the alternatives mean that some riders will have great difficulty getting beyond the paddock.

Balanced environmentalism means getting the balance right between conserving our environment and using our natural resources in a sustainable way. That includes recreational users as well as economic users. I restate the National Party's position: we believe it is an extreme approach to lock out recreational users who have been responsible. It is an extreme approach of this government to force these good people, who have passionately looked after these areas for over 100 years, into a situation where they have to negotiate over the finite detail of alternatives which to date have been far less than what they have traditionally had access to. I believe it is totally unacceptable that they have been treated not like second-rate citizens but like third-rate citizens and have been basically accused of wrecking what has obviously been determined to be good enough to become national parks.

We are asking for access to those trails. The government should not lock these people out. I believe it is against the principles of ensuring sustainable environmentalism—where recreational users are able to enjoy our beautiful outdoors in a way that is safe, in a way that is accessible and in a way that ensures the ongoing education about the beauty of these areas is not limited to an elite minority.