



Speech by

**Rosa Lee Long**

**MEMBER FOR TABLELANDS**

Hansard Thursday, 20 April 2006

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## **FORESTRY PLANTATIONS QUEENSLAND BILL**

**Ms LEE LONG** (Tablelands—ONP) (4.10 pm): I rise to contribute to the Forestry Plantations Queensland Bill 2006. Forestry has long been an issue close to my heart and the heart of the people of the Tablelands electorate. We well remember the external powers used by Bob Hawke to declare World Heritage to override the Tasmanian government over the Gordon-below-Franklin Dam issue in the early eighties. Then he declared World Heritage over large sections of native forest in my Tablelands electorate and other parts of far-north Queensland in 1987. This caused a huge amount of anger which persists today and which has resulted in the closure of most sawmills in the north and the loss of thousands of jobs directly and indirectly. There is now only one major mill north of Mackay. To make themselves look better at the time the government created temporary, dead-end schemes such as the CRAP scheme to blur the unemployment figures, but the public saw this for what it was: a wicked waste of taxpayers' money.

This bill comes about after the recent split of the native forest section of Forestry from the plantation section which became effective from 1 April 2006. The native forest section is no longer part of Forestry and is now owned and controlled by DNRMW. This action reduces the original mighty forestry department to just plantations. Of course, we see the continued whittling away of the importance of the primary industries portfolio.

Atherton was once the proud centre for a large and efficient forestry department which employed hundreds of workers. Over a period of nearly 20 years it has been continually hacked back until today there are only about nine people presently employed there—enough, as they say, to make an old man cry.

The plantations are a state owned asset presently managed by DPI Forestry under a commercialised business unit. This bill is all about corporatising the commercial utilisation of these state plantations by establishing the position of chief plantation forestry officer and creating a corporation sole with supporting amendments to allow this new structure to come into effect.

We already have many corporatised structures in place for the operation of many of the state's assets, from energy and water supply to the operation of rail services and the management of ports. These are controlled under Corporations Law. But this will not be the case with this new structure of Forestry Plantations Queensland, which will be a corporation sole and will have the corporation vested in a single person, being the chief plantation officer—a very powerful position one would have to say. Being a corporation sole will exempt it not only from Corporations Law but also from the Ombudsman's Act 2001 which will mean that not even the Ombudsman can look into its commercial operations. Transparency will be a thing of the past.

Corporatisation of government departments is becoming very commonplace these days, with governments putting themselves at arm's length from departments that they were traditionally responsible for. We are well on the way to being looked after from the cradle to the grave by corporations, and if we follow the federal government's example it will not be long before they are all sold off to the highest bidder, most probably foreigners.

The claim that the current forestry commercialised business unit is too restrictive to compete in the current marketplace has opened the way to create the corporation sole to be known as Forestry

Plantations Queensland. It will be headed by a single person in the position of chief plantation forestry officer who will be appointed by the Governor in Council and will be answerable to the two shareholding ministers, the Treasurer and the minister for DPIF. The new board comprising five members will be appointed by the minister and the members will serve three-year terms.

With the splitting of the two identities, that is native forests and plantations, so also have the assets and liabilities been split and divided up. It is interesting to note that 50 per cent of any profits that Forestry Plantations Queensland makes will have to be paid to Queensland Treasury each year as is the current practice. The argument for all of this is to make the operation commercially more competitive, but it comes with a built-in money grab by Treasury. However, one of the positives to come out of all of this is that Forestry Plantations Queensland will continue to provide access to other users of state plantation forests, including horse riders.

Forestry has been on the receiving end of too much uncertainty for too long. It has been run down to a disgraceful degree because of a lack of direction and leadership. It is now staring down the barrel of corporatisation without even the protection of Corporations Law or any public transparency.

As I said earlier, in my region we had nearly a century of extremely successful forestry, mostly under the very skilled direction of government public servants in the forestry department. The management methods used were very sophisticated and enormously efficient. Under the old methods timber mills and their support industries such as loggers, transport operators and so on were a mainstay of many centres such as Mareeba, Millaa Millaa, Herberton, Kairi, Ravenshoe and so on. At the same time, the forests being logged were so carefully looked after by the department that come the introduction of World Heritage listing in 1987 large areas of timber that had been harvested for more than 100 years were considered to be in pristine condition.

I spoke about this in my maiden speech in 2001, just a year after we celebrated the Century of Forestry in Queensland. For most of that first 100 years forestry made significant contributions to the economy and development of Queensland and was a major source of employment in regional areas. A practical management system for state forests recognised the diversity of public demand and provided a balance of environmental conservation, production and public recreation.

Queensland built up a core of highly skilled forest managers and developed sustainable native forests and harvesting practices that were internationally recognised as world's best practice. But all that counted for nought in 1987 when they were determined to close it down and we can see that will happen in the southern part of this state and has already begun.

In a way, the old forestry hands did too good a job of looking after the resource because it is now locked up and locked away in northern Queensland. As I said, it will not be long before the same thing will be happening in the southern part of this state. This locking up has led to the almost total destruction of one of the north's most important traditional industries and many of the pristine native forests are now havens for vermin and considered to be among the worst of neighbours. We will be seeing more and more of the same happening in southern Queensland, as I said, in particular in the south-western regions. As we heard this morning, it is planned to close about 25 per cent of existing timber mills in the near future.

Recently Cyclone Larry tore down a massive number of trees in our native forests which brings a very strong argument to reintroduce sustainable selective logging to these areas once again, especially with new methods including helicopter transport which is already used in countries such as Canada. Methods like this would make no impact on the forest while returning an important industry to Queensland and eliminating the need to import timber from other countries which brings with it new pests and diseases. Borers are now found in a lot of imported furniture. Such purchases from Brisbane stores have been reported to DPIF yet nothing has been done about it. I have been told personally about furniture bought in Brisbane stores that has been returned to the place of purchase where they were told the item would simply be sprayed with a pressure pack and put back on the floor for sale. A number of items, I have been told, have been returned to the stores by this particular person.

This bill is all about corporatising yet another public utility. This government wants us to believe that it is to make our plantation operations more commercially efficient, but the requirement for half of all the profits to go straight to Treasury tells us where the real interest lies. While we all know that money does not grow on trees, it seems that this government believes it only grows on plantation trees.