



Speech by

Andrew Cripps

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

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WILD RIVERS AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr CRIPPS (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (3.12 pm): I rise to make a contribution to the debate on the Wild Rivers and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2007. This bill will enable the declaration of the Staaten and Gregory rivers, Settlement Creek, Morning Inlet and Hinchinbrook and Fraser islands as wild river areas. Hinchinbrook Island is in my electorate and I intend to speak for some time later about the implications of the wild rivers declaration on Hinchinbrook Island.

From the very beginning, there have been considerable concerns expressed by a range of organisations from regional Queensland which oppose this legislation. The first bill, which resulted in the Wild Rivers Act 2005, was particularly punitive legislation that was introduced by the Beattie government to honour a 2004 state election promise that was designed to buy the preferences of the Queensland Greens. It was a political manoeuvre. Without regard for the impact that the legislation would have on landowners and communities in regional and rural areas, the government introduced the legislation in the face of stringent opposition from the Queensland Resources Council, the Cape York Land Council, a number of local councils, especially the Cook shire, and AgForce.

At that time, the opposition sought to draw the government's attention to significant defects in the legislation. Those defects were confirmed last year when this House considered a raft of amendments to the Wild Rivers Act in the form of the Wild Rivers and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. The amendments that were passed last year mitigated some of the oppressive provisions of the original wild rivers legislation. To a degree, those amendments made the act more workable.

In developing the amendments last year, the government consulted organisations such as the QRC, the LGAQ and AgForce. These organisations sought a range of changes to the legislation that had increased uncertainty, diminished the property rights of landowners and miners, and limited the potential for development in regional economies and rural shires. The Queensland coalition supported the amendments contained in the bill that was introduced last year to try to give rural industries and rural communities some flexibility and opportunities into the future. The organisations that participated in the consultation process with the government indicated that they welcomed the changes because, to a certain extent, the amendments mitigated the severity of the restrictions that landowners would face when wild river declarations were made.

Members could then imagine the surprise of the AgForce organisation, Queensland's peak rural lobby group, when Premier Beattie, at a community cabinet meeting at Atherton on Sunday, 11 February 2007, said in response to a question from a grazier affected by the Staaten River wild river declaration that AgForce supported and signed off on the wild rivers declarations. I refer members to parts of the ABC's Far North Queensland Rural Report dated 15 February 2007 titled 'AgForce denies supporting wild rivers legislation', which reports as follows—

Mr Shine: Where were you? Why didn't you come?

Mr Wallace: Why weren't you there?

Mr CRIPPS: This morning in this House I heard the Treasurer make a whole heap of very supportive comments about the professionalism of the ABC and how it reports its stories. So if the Attorney-General

and the Minister for Natural Resources and Water do not want to listen to what the ABC reported in this respect, that is fine. I will continue with my speech.

The ABC reported—

Contrary to what Premier Beattie said on the weekend, peak rural lobby group Agforce is denying it supports the Queensland Government's new Wild Rivers legislation. Agforce is claiming part responsibility for 'unwinding' the legislation associated with the first Wild Rivers declaration applicable to Gulf river systems.

At last Sunday's community cabinet meeting held in Atherton, some people asked Premier Beattie questions about wild river declarations. Strathmore grazier Scott Harris is likely to be affected by the Staaten River wild river declaration. He asked the Premier if he could tell his employees why they no longer have jobs. The Premier, in his response, pointed out that there were two areas affected by wild rivers legislation. He started his response by concentrating on the first declaration, which includes four rivers in the gulf region, including the Staaten River. Mr Beattie said that AgForce supported and signed off on this first model agreement. He stated further—

We sat down with the miners, the farmers, we sat down with the environmentalists and Indigenous people and we came up with an agreement which Agforce supported.

AgForce president, Peter Kenny, admits that he negotiated with the government to ensure that the first wild rivers declaration was changed, but he denies supporting the legislation. He states—

We reject the legislation outright and anything associated with it... we've had to work with the Government realising that this legislation will not be repealed... and so the only way to alleviate the situation is to negotiate with the Government to try to unwind this legislation to the extent that people can actually live in the country.

Those words are no endorsement of the wild rivers legislation. That much is clear.

Mr Hinchliffe interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Hoolihan): Order! Would the member for Stafford please return to his seat if he wishes to make comment.

Mr CRIPPS: Regrettably, the Premier is not the only member of the government to misrepresent AgForce with respect to the wild rivers legislation. In a media statement on Tuesday, 12 December 2006, the Minister for Natural Resources and Water asserted—

Throughout 2006 exhaustive stakeholder consultation occurred with environmentalists, Indigenous landholders, miners and graziers and their support was obtained. Amendments to the act occurred last month to implement changes negotiated with stakeholders.

Mr Wallace said further that he wanted the declarations of the six wild rivers areas done and dusted, adding—

This type of legislation has never been attempted before in Queensland or anywhere else in Australia. We expected it would take time to consult and finetune the act and this has occurred. The Wilderness Society, Agforce and the Queensland Resources Council now all agree about how to protect these pristine rivers.

Again, these are half-truths being perpetuated by the government to try to cloak itself in some sort of security blanket that it has done the right thing by landowners. It has not. Just because these stakeholders participated in the consultation process with respect to the recent amendments to the wild rivers legislation last year does not imply some sort of tacit support for the wild rivers legislation. It does not.

AgForce does not support the wild rivers legislation because its implementation fails to recognise sustainable development and adds to the increased level of restrictions and regulations that burden landowners and the opportunities of councils and other industries to develop, particularly the mining industry. Speaking of the mining industry, the QRC is also opposed to any further declarations because of the potential for declarations to limit further exploration and development of the mining industry in Queensland.

During the debate on the bill amending the Wild Rivers Act last year, I spoke about the implications of the wild rivers legislation on Hinchinbrook Island. Hinchinbrook Island is Australia's largest island national park. Its unique environment has resulted in both the Queensland government and the Commonwealth government choosing to make a range of conservation declarations on and around the island to preserve its natural values. Hinchinbrook Island's natural values were recognised early. The island itself was declared a national park in 1932. While I fully support the ongoing preservation and conservation of Hinchinbrook Island, one has to wonder whether the declaration of the island as a national park, its subsequent World Heritage listing and the fact that it is surrounded by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park would be more than adequate protection for the environment in that area without the island being declared a wild rivers area.

A very interesting email arrived at my office recently on Sunday, 11 February from the Alliance to Save Hinchinbrook regarding the proposed declaration of Hinchinbrook Island as a wild river area. I understand that it was sent to all members in this place. This is an organisation that has been established by a group of people which focuses its activity principally on opposing the Port Hinchinbrook development just south of Cardwell. As an aside, the Beattie government has periodically been unreasonable in its

treatment of the various applications that it has been required to assess regarding the Port Hinchinbrook development, but that is a discussion to have at another time. I do not support the Alliance to Save Hinchinbrook and its opposition to the Port Hinchinbrook development. It is an excellent development that has been successful so far and has great potential for the future.

However, on this occasion the Alliance to Save Hinchinbrook has expressed its opposition to the proposed wild river declaration for Hinchinbrook Island. The Alliance to Save Hinchinbrook argues that Hinchinbrook Island is already adequately protected as a national park. This is the point I argued last year during the debate on the Wild Rivers and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2006. The minister ought to consider, given that misgivings about the wild rivers declaration associated with Hinchinbrook Island are being expressed by a variety of interested parties, whether or not this particular declaration with respect to Hinchinbrook Island is appropriate or whether it needs to be looked at again.

There is a range of issues associated with this legislation that need to be put on the record. I understand that further wild river declarations will not be scrutinised by the Queensland Legislative Assembly but will be considered only by the minister. This is a very concerning situation, especially given that already notice has been issued that the Cape York Peninsula moratorium area—comprising the catchments and basins of the Jacky Jacky, the Jardine, the Ducie, the Wenlock, the Olive, the Pascoe, the Lockhart, the Watson, the Archer, the Stewart, the Holroyd, the Coleman and Jeannie rivers—is in the firing line for wild river declarations.

There will be no provision for an appeal to be lodged against a wild river declaration. This is a fundamental legislative principle. The minister will be the only person who nominates and declares a wild river. No debate about the merits or otherwise of individual declarations will take place here in the Queensland parliament, nor will the declaration be subject to a disallowance motion. This is a blatant and arrogant subjugation of the parliament.

Indigenous groups in far-north Queensland have also expressed their dissatisfaction about the wild rivers legislation, although the minister and the government will probably try to claim that they have been subdued by the amendments in last year's bill and now support the legislation as well. The Cape York Land Council expressed concerns that the wild rivers legislation would have negative effects on far-north Queensland Indigenous communities with respect to the development opportunities that may be denied as a result of wild river declarations.

Another matter that deserves some attention is the significant restrictions that will be placed on regional and rural landowners that will result in the locking up of large tracts of land under wild river declarations which, as a consequence, will result in that land being degraded and overrun in many cases by feral animals and pest weeds. That this occurs where access to land is restricted has been well documented, particularly in relation to state forests and national parks, especially in north Queensland, where the wild rivers legislation will have its greatest and most significant and most punitive ramifications.

There are very serious problems with feral animals on state controlled land in north Queensland. Similarly, there are serious problems with pest weeds. Wild river declarations will cover private land. As such, I assume private landholders will continue to be responsible for controlling the pest weeds and feral animals on the area of their properties affected by wild river declarations. This is another regrettable example of the Beattie government placing significant burdens on private landowners. Private landowners will now be burdened with controlling pest weeds and feral animals, at significant cost, on their land that they cannot use for productive purposes. If it sounds like the government's vegetation management legislation there is a good reason for that.

As I said when this place last considered wild rivers legislation, the Queensland coalition supports sensible efforts to conserve areas of environmental significance. The Queensland coalition supports common-sense conservation and there is no reason why these goals cannot be achieved in conjunction with sustainable economic development. But this bill will inhibit that development. For this reason the opposition will oppose this legislation. The Beattie government has not learnt its lesson about introducing poorly conceived legislation and it has demonstrated that it will continue with its punitive and unfair treatment of rural and regional Queenslanders by failing to take on board the concerns expressed by those in opposition to this bill.