



Speech by

Phil Weightman

MEMBER FOR CLEVELAND

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ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr WEIGHTMAN (Cleveland—ALP) (4.09 pm): I am pleased to contribute to the debate on the Environmental Protection and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2007. There are a number of basic changes being proposed in this bill, including the need to devolve certain powers in the Environmental Protection Act 1994 to allow councils more flexibility to administer their responsibility under that act. There have been many examples where constituents in my area have been pushed back and forth between the council and the state government on minor environmental issues, such as excess dust from roads, car parks, parks and refuse areas and odours from similar areas. At the moment, it is all too easy to play the blame game to the detriment of the constituent. Under these amendments, there will be no doubt as to who is responsible and it will enable a quicker response.

The same situation applies to the protection of waterways. This issue is of great concern to the people of my area because of the proximity of the area to the beautiful Moreton Bay. We have just received an 'F' on our waterways testing, and this is due mainly to the silt runoff from development areas. I have fielded complaints from many people saying that they have raised these issues with the council only to be told that it is an EPA matter. While these two levels of government are working out who should respond, the damage is done and any action is like closing the gate after the horse has bolted. The big loser in this regard is the quality of water in the bay which affects the unique and varied marine life living there. It is hoped that these amendments will help remedy this situation to some extent.

One area of this legislation has evoked a great deal of debate, with many people in the opposition failing to understand the significant contribution the flying fox makes to the overall environment. In and around my area of Cleveland, there are many flying fox colonies with some very dedicated people committed to ensuring their survival. Flying foxes are doing it tough during this prolonged drought, with many becoming sick and dying as a result of a reduced diet.

They are one of a few species that has the capacity to carry seeds. They help spread seeds that would not otherwise be spread across great distances—in particular, in rainforest areas. Without flying foxes, we are putting the future of our rainforests in jeopardy. They are particularly useful in helping to grow eucalyptus, which cannot grow on their own because their seeds fall in the shadows of the larger trees and they cannot grow without sun. The bats help spread these seeds further than the shade of the tree so they can grow. It is estimated that a single flying fox can dispense up to 60,000 seeds in one night.

Yes, they are not the quiet neighbour we may want and, yes, they do have personal habits that you would not envy, but that does not mean they should be maligned. They do not move into the city because they are pests; they move because deforestation means they are running out of places to nest. When they move into urban areas, it is a sure sign we have gone too far and cut down too much forest. If we cut down too much forest and then they move into cities and urban areas and then we get rid of them because we think they are a pest, we lose one of the key things that can help rejuvenate forests—colonies of flying foxes.

Flying foxes are a breed of megabats. They do not like living in shelters or permanent structures; that is a habit of microbats which are entirely different creatures. Flying foxes prefer trees and forests. In Victoria, the flying fox population has declined by at least 35 per cent in the last 10 years, but most flying fox biologists believe the rate is closer to 50 per cent. In response to the fear campaign that flying foxes are a health risk, the science explains that such fears are entirely false.

Ms Jones interjected.

Mr Messenger interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr English): Order! The member for Cleveland has the call. If other members wish to speak, I would welcome them on the speaking list.

Mr WEIGHTMAN: Thank you. Based on all the research conducted since the lyssavirus was discovered in Australia in 1996, less than one per cent of wild flying foxes carry lyssavirus, and there is no danger of catching lyssavirus from being near or under a bat colony. To support that I say this: when 100 bats were shot in the Melbourne Botanical Gardens and their bodies were autopsied, not a single bat was found to be carrying lyssavirus. Their bodies were also tested for the Hendra and Menangle viruses but all tested negative. They are simply not the dangerous creature some people would have us think they are. If you think they are a pest, you are wrong. If you got rid of them, then fruit eating insects would run rampant and really destroy the fruit that people are growing. Despite the relatively minor damage they might do to fruit trees, they are keeping the insects in check.

This debate should not be about saying that one species is more important than another—simply because I am not qualified to make that decision. There are smarter people only too happy to step up and make that type of decision. What I do know is that we are a species that has invaded the habitat of many other species like the flying fox. We have cut down their homes and put up our own, and then we have the hide to complain that they are not good neighbours. Cohabitation on this earth takes cooperation, consideration and a little bit of common sense and decency. Flying foxes need protection and I am pleased that this legislation provides that protection. I commend this bill to the House.