



Speech by

Vaughan Johnson

MEMBER FOR GREGORY

Hansard Thursday, 22 February 2007

WILD RIVERS AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr JOHNSON (Gregory—NPA) (4.22 pm): In speaking to the Wild Rivers and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2007 this afternoon naturally I will be supporting the stand taken by the opposition, especially the shadow spokesman, the member for Darling Downs. This legislation talks about environmental responsibilities. The wild rivers of north Queensland, or any part of Queensland for that matter, are no different from any other river system in this great state. With all the controversy in recent months and weeks over the water grid for south-east Queensland—and I know there is a terrible drought raging in south-east Queensland—have we heard it mentioned at any time that the Mary River could be declared under the wild rivers legislation? No, because we are going to build a dam on that river. That has not been thought through properly. I believe that the same is applicable to this legislation that we are debating this afternoon.

When we talk about channels and tributaries of those main river systems in north Queensland—the Staaten, Hinchinbrook, Settlement, Gregory, Morning Inlet and Fraser river systems—we are talking about very important regions in a very fragile area of Queensland. We are talking coastal areas, we are talking gulf areas, we are talking peninsula areas. It does not matter what part of Queensland we live in; I believe that we all live in a fragile environment. We would not have survived in this country for the last 219 years if we had gone out there and blatantly savaged, raped and pillaged the land for our own advantage. I think our forefathers and foremothers had a better and more responsible vision than that.

When we look at those northern rivers—and I am talking about the peninsula and gulf streams here—and at the settlements in those areas, we see that they are mainly Indigenous settlements. There are cattle properties on the deltas of those rivers, and there is the opportunity to run magnificent operations that turn off fat bullocks, or stores for that matter, and bring them into some other area of Queensland for fattening to send them to abattoirs in Queensland or for live export into Asia.

As the shadow spokesman for Indigenous affairs in this place, I will certainly be standing up for what is right for the Indigenous people of Queensland. We had a magnificent meeting a couple of nights ago, hosted by the Speaker of the House. There were Aboriginal elders and leaders from right around the state, members of parliament and other interested groups present. I thought the exchange of dialogue was very fruitful and very purposeful in trying to get genuine outcomes for our Indigenous brothers and sisters. The fact of the matter is that this piece of legislation is going to affect and hinder the progress of some of those communities in the far north. We should be giving Indigenous communities purpose—giving them the opportunity to go forward themselves and develop operations in some of those magnificent deltas that we are talking about.

For example, let us look at the Mitchell River. We are not talking about the Mitchell River in this legislation as such, but the Mitchell River catchment has the capacity to receive 77 times more rainfall than that which falls over the whole Murray-Darling system, and that water just goes out. Indigenous people live in those areas and there is the capacity to harvest that water and bring it back to the south. It is about giving those people that opportunity. But what is this legislation doing? It is shutting them out. It is shutting that opportunity down. We do not need to put any more impediments or obstacles in their way. We need to go with those people. I believe that if we are going to get reconciliation to work in this state and in this

nation we have to have practical reconciliation where we take these people with us. Let them have a voice. They have councils. They are part of our community, and they have been there for thousands of years.

I say this to the minister here today: the consultation process for legislation is done by government departments and the make-up of those government departments a lot of times does not include good practical people. There are many theory type people in those departments. I respect those people but often the consultation process is not done properly. I believe that, if you are going to negotiate with the Wilderness Society or other conservation groups, you are not getting a real gauge, a real measure, of what we should be determining here in relation to getting genuine outcomes for the future development of this region. I stand by those people in the far north, whether they be Indigenous communities, agricultural operations or whatever. They have survived for the past 150 years because they have been good managers of the environment.

We have talked about noxious weeds in those northern river systems and estuaries. Let us talk about rubber vine for a minute. Rubber vine is out of control. The minister might like to tell us in his summary how that is going to be controlled. I see that leucaena cannot be grown there. That is a magnificent cattle crop and it has certainly stood by the industry in recent years. But all of these issues are going to retard future development of that region and put those people back a long way further.

We talk about the population explosion in south-east Queensland. In the Redlands, for example, there is all that magnificent farming land, but most of it is now under residential estates. You would know, Mr Deputy Speaker English, because you live there and represent those people.

The sad fact of the matter is that, whilst a lot of new homes are being built, the real problem is that they cannot get water into the homes because we have a drought on our hands. It is about planning and getting the environmental measures right. I know the Premier has a plan for water at the moment, and I hope it works. No-one hopes more than I do that it works, because it is sad to see what we have on our hands.

As the honourable member for Toowoomba South said this afternoon, there is the potential to get the population to live in other regions and develop other regions—not shut other regions down through stupid legislation like this that will retard growth in those regions. Diversification is what it is all about. It is about letting these people develop in other regions and live in other regions. All our population centres and centres of growth are along the coast, but where is the wealth generation capacity in this state? It is out in rural and remote Queensland. It is out where about two or three per cent of the population live. It is the old adage again, and I ask the minister to take a long hard look at what the government is doing in this state.

We talk about the greens movement, and look at what the greens want to do with the coal industry. Queensland would be shut down if we let the green movement have their way. I know the federal Labor opposition is out there trying to stand up for the coalmining industry, and I hope it can do that. But, at the end of the day, if the greens give their vote of support to the federal Labor Party at the next federal election, we can bet our bottom dollar there will be a bargaining tool in the deal after the election is over and the Labor Party wins government. It would be looking after the greens—which is exactly what the state government is doing here now. The government is looking after the greens, the wilderness people and the environmental people.

The real environmental people in this state are the people who live and work this state and have done so for the last 200 years. I represent an area in far western Queensland where it rarely ever rains. When it does rain, we make use of that land; we do not go out and abuse it, overstock it and do all of the ridiculous things that a lot of people think we do. The same is applicable to far-north Queensland and this wild rivers legislation. I urge members on the other side of the House to show some sanity, some support and some responsibility when they configure this type of legislation in the future. If they are going to play into the hands of two or three minority groups that are out there voicing their opinion, at the end of the day we will have a total shutdown of this state.

Do members remember what happened in north Queensland when the government shut down the timber industry in the Tablelands area? That area had been milled for probably four generations, but that industry was shut down because of the World Heritage listing. We saw what happened to those towns and they will never grow again. The same is applicable right along the coastal areas where we saw the timber industry shut down. This will shut down the opportunity for development in these regions in question.

I do not want to talk for too much longer. The fair dinkum issues here are those deltas in those river systems. The Indigenous population want to change their lives, they want to progress their future, they want a future for their children and their children's children, and they want to get out of this slimy, scum society they are living and working in. That is exactly what the speakers forum came up with last Tuesday night. They want true representation and purpose in what they are trying to do.

I urge the members of this parliament—especially the government members—to show some leadership and direction. When this government formulates legislation and policy, we need genuine outcomes that will be advantageous to the majority not just the reckless minority. I think we are all in the same mould when it comes to looking after what we have got, whether it is here in south-east Queensland, whether it is in the far north, whether it is on the coastal strip or whether it is in remote areas and desert

inlands like I represent. It saddens me to think that we are debating issues such as this in this state when there are other more meaningful and positive things we could be discussing and putting in place for the general benefit of the four billion people who live in our great state.

Look at our Indigenous people. There are 5,200 people in prison in Queensland and 25 per cent of our prison population is made up of Indigenous people. This is retarding them again. We have to give them purpose. I can assure the House, because I have said it in this House before, that, while I represent those people in my area of responsibility, I will stand up for them to get that genuine resolve and genuine outcome they want to progress their cause in this state and nation as productive citizens in the region, state and country where they live.