



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR GREGORY

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LAND AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr JOHNSON (Gregory—NPA) (6.24 pm): In rising to speak to the Land and Other Legislation Amendment Bill I want to pick up on a couple of points made by the honourable member for Whitsunday. I do not think there is anybody on this side of the House—I have not seen that person whoever he or she may be—who believes in environmental vandalism. If I can say this: the one thing that this side of the House has an issue with is the environmental police or the green police or whatever you want to call them. When they were put in place by the former minister, now the health minister, it was a scourge on the fair-minded people who went about their business in a fair-minded way. I will admit that there are definitely people out there who we know breach the rules from time to time, but there is no need to put those people in place to be a scourge on the rest of the community who are out there trying to do the right thing. When you see people like Ashley McKay—no finer man ever walked the face of God's earth than he—who was subjected to terrible trauma—

Mr Lawlor: Big wrap.

Mr JOHNSON: Big wrap all right. I take the interjection from the honourable member for Southport. There is no finer man. I have been to see firsthand precisely what happened at Torres Park. It was only because of the honesty, decency and integrity of Ashley McKay that he pulled up the bulldozers because he knew they were going over the line. In that case it was about clearing cypress pine—you probably have to cut 100 trees before you get one good one in that country—and what he was subjected to because somebody had a vendetta and wanted to make an example of him. Not everybody is out there to do the wrong thing. The great majority of people are out there to do the right thing.

The most important thing in this legislation—and I thank the minister—is the security of tenure for people with leasehold land. We talk about freehold—and I heard the honourable member for Tablelands talk about freehold title. But leasehold land is very important. It is sacred to the people who work it, understand it and use it in an everyday way to earn their living. I lived on a leasehold property at Quilpie for most of my working life as a grazier and my father before me. The point I make is that we managed that property in a very responsible way. I remember the days when land commissioners came around. I say to the minister today that I would like to see the return of land commissioners. They were fantastic people. They were people who went out and did an annual or biannual inspection to see how the management strategies were going.

At Quilpie we have had algaroba—the mongrel plant that it was—Noogoora burr and all those sorts of noxious weeds that are detrimental to the ongoing viability of these places. Regardless of whether you have a freehold block or a leasehold block, you are certainly going to manage the noxious weeds and feral animals to make certain that your property is in tiptop shape so that you can get full productivity from it.

I say to the minister here tonight that these 40-year leases are good. It is a good concept because it gives people an opportunity to plan. The provision of an extra 10 years on their lease if they have Indigenous land use agreements is important too as part of the reconciliation process—I know the government has been working at that; I think we have all worked at that. I would like the minister to elaborate on that in his summary as to how that might be and what the rights would be of the landholders who enter into those ILUAs with Indigenous people to get an extra 10 years on their lease.

I think the important thing to remember is proper management strategies. I noticed the minister has had consultation with Indigenous groups and AgForce. I know a lot of people have criticised AgForce over a long period of time. Regardless of who they are or what body it is and whether they support the government or not, they have to work with the government of the day to make certain that we get the best outcome for the people. I pay tribute to AgForce. I believe that it has endeavoured to get the best outcome for the people who use these leasehold properties to earn an income.

Mr JOHNSON (Gregory—NPA) (7.32 pm): Before dinner I mentioned the input made by various interest groups, AgForce in particular. I also said that AgForce has been subjected to lot of criticism over a long period from groups that it represents. Tonight, for the record I say that none of us are perfect. We all try to do the best we can, and I believe that that is precisely what AgForce does under Peter Kenny, Brett de Hayr and the team. I put that on the record today. Regardless of which party is in government, organisations such as AgForce must work with government to get the best outcomes for their representatives. I believe that that is exactly what AgForce does.

I turn to the advisory committee that the minister will be putting in place to address crown rental leases and other issues applicable to this legislation. In all sincerity I say to the minister that there are a lot of good people who could make up that panel. They are people who will act truthfully and give their best to achieve better outcomes for rural and regional Queensland, the environmental and conservation causes, the grazing and pastoral industries, and for those people who are endeavouring to derive an income from working the leasehold properties in question.

One good aspect of the legislation is the fact that it compliments people who do the right thing, making it easier for them to obtain new leases when their old ones are up in 30, 40 or 50 years—whatever the case may be. Security of tenure is the real issue here. Over the last few years we have witnessed land degradation, and others have spoken about that in the House this afternoon. Because this country is governed by seasonal conditions, we will always be subjected to land degradation regardless of whether that land is freehold or leasehold. Nobody knows that better than the people of Queensland because we are currently experiencing, especially in south-east Queensland, the worst drought in living memory, or the past 100 years at least. Last week, Mr Deputy Speaker and members of the Public Accounts Committee flew to Canberra for a meeting. It was a shock for us to see the terrible state of the countryside around Canberra. It made me realise just how widespread this drought is.

Management practices and stocking practices will always come under scrutiny and be subjected to criticism, especially when people are trying to hang on to breeding stock. It is always difficult to know when to sell or when to cut back on numbers, and we cannot always blame people for the choices that they make. At the end of the day, the Department of Primary Industries has a policy in place where it can review livestock management strategies. That is good and I support it. However, at the same time people should not point the bone at landholders, because our country can get into grave situations through drought. Overstocking and poor management strategies and habits are another question.

This evening I wish to touch on the issue of unimproved capital value. I made reference to this yesterday when we spoke with the departmental officers. I am concerned about issues affecting properties that are adjacent to other properties that might have channels running through them, or a delta of some type, and good flats. Such properties will have an advantage over neighbouring properties in higher country, but those properties can also run back into higher country. Where that country is of the same type of terrain, we have to look at a methodology that will give us a formula. I hope that in time the advisory committee will be able to do that. This is a very important part of management strategies.

I am gravely concerned about the situation facing people with freehold leases who have paid off their properties or whose instalments are no longer being paid. In recent years we have witnessed a huge hike in the price of rural properties because of the stability of the beef market, the quality product that we produce in this country and the export earnings applicable to that. The real issue is whether local governments will run riot and increase rates because of the valuations in question. That is something that I ask the minister to keep an eye on. At the end the day, this could make all the difference in achieving a viable outcome as opposed to a non-viable outcome.

No-one would ever have dreamed that the Darling Downs would experience a drought like this one. Never in my lifetime have I seen anything like it. In the country that I represent, we see such droughts continually, year in and year out, but I cannot believe what the Darling Downs has been subjected to in the past six or seven years.

Mr Hopper: No-one has ever seen it.

Mr JOHNSON: I take that interjection from the member for Darling Downs. Yesterday I was at my sister and brother-in-law's place which is just north of Dalby. It was like being back in Quilpie during the 1965 drought. That is how crook it is.

However, I trust that the minister and his department—and there are some good level-headed people there—will keep a close eye on management strategies and on the fairness of the methodologies for arriving at rent amounts. At the same time, the department has to take into account the current good prices for cattle while bearing in mind the fact that that is also governed by seasonal conditions. If we are

going to be genuine about creating a formula that will be fair, we also have to think about how in the future we are going to encourage young people onto the land. If they are going to be subject to the horrific cost of purchasing properties and then be subjected to the huge government charges and fees on top of that, it is going to render any situation non-viable and it will deter people from making a life on the land. I do not think we want to see that happen in Queensland or Australia.

I also want to touch on an issue the minister referred to in his second reading speech, which is that the bill—

... allows clearing on vegetation on 'indigenous land' for community housing and housing for essential government services, clarifies the interpretation of existing provisions and addresses a number of minor technical or drafting matters.

This is a part of the legislation that I am gravely concerned about. In the many Indigenous communities of north Queensland, and anywhere in Queensland, our Indigenous people are endeavouring to own their own homes in those communities and live a life like any normal Queenslanders. I am very concerned about native title. I trust that the minister will be able to clarify this in his summary. Whilst it is good that people can clear land or throw land open for building purposes, what about native title? We mentioned that yesterday in the briefing from the minister's departmental officers.

I was a member of the Palm Island parliamentary select committee that the Premier constituted a couple of years ago. The real issue that came out of that committee was home ownership. If we are going to be genuine on behalf of our Indigenous people to get home ownership, we have to be fair dinkum and up-front. If the federal government has to play a role in this, so be it. We have to get the native title factor right so that we can build on these communities or so the Indigenous can have some sort of freehold or 99-year leases so they can own their own homes and pass them on to their children. This is the one aspect of the Indigenous culture that they want to be the same as the non-Indigenous culture.

Last night I turned my TV on to see a panel that was being compered by Jeff McMullen and attended by Warren Mundine, Mal Brough, Patrick Dobson and another lady whose name I cannot remember. This lady was a consultant or an adviser to the Indigenous communities. The one thing that she and the two Aboriginal leaders mentioned was the importance of Aboriginal home ownership. I say tonight, and I say this to the minister, that this is an important issue in 2007. It is an issue that I believe every government agency has to play a responsible role in. Government agencies have to ensure that the native title issue is resolved so we can see housing built for these people and they can take pride in the communities in which they live. One particular gentleman said to us during the Palm Island hearings on Palm Island, 'We want to be able to own our own home so we can pass it on to the next generation and the next generation.' That makes sense.

I believe that if we are going to be fair dinkum about this we have to make certain that we do something about it now. It is no good paying lip-service to it. We have to make it happen. The minister is in the driving seat to make a difference. I say solemnly that I hope the minister can do something about this. The minister is on the doorstep of those communities. He knows full well what the situation is. I think that the whole of Queensland will applaud the minister or any other government agency if we can get that genuine resolve to help those people.

The other issue I wanted to touch on is the responsible management of these leasehold properties. The real issue is that many people are critical of management strategies. What we have to do, with the advisory panel that the minister is going to form, is to make certain that there is a cohesive understanding between government and lessees. Before dinner I mentioned the former land commissioners. I believe that we need to get rid of the mentality about the green police or environmental police. I believe that those land commissioners need to be put back in place. They were champion people. They were absolute bloody good fellas. They would come home when my old man was alive. They would stay the night. The next day they would do a property inspection. They were really good people. We loved to have them at our house and we enjoyed their company. I say to the minister that they are the sort of people who need to be put in place to get back a working relationship and unity between the department and the lessees of these pastoral properties. I say that sincerely because in reality there is too much 'them' and 'us' out there now. People are saying, 'What is the government going to do next? What is happening?' I heard my colleague the member for Warrego speak this afternoon about the government's southern knock 'em down, drag 'em out approach to local government and the \$25 million Size, Shape and Sustainability program being thrown out the door. This is what we do not need in Queensland.

If we are going to run this state as a dictatorship and a standover operation, it is certainly going to create resentment. People are going to be offside. I believe that when we talk about leasehold properties, freehold properties, special leases and any other type of leases, we are talking about the sustainable, proper management of the environment that we have been given to use and protect.

I believe that we are all environmentalists. I believe that we are all conservationists. I sincerely say to the minister: please be reasonable with these people in question because they are out there having a fair go. It has not been an easy issue over recent years. If we are going to get that outcome, where we see the long-term operation of these pastoral holdings by the younger generation and the current generation, we have to give them a fair go.

Finally, it would be absolutely fantastic if the minister could find another way of making those mulga lands a better operation for those people in question. Thirty thousand acres at Charleville is not enough. There have to be ways to help those people to get bigger aggregations and ways to help other people to leave the land if they want to vacate.