



Speech by

John-Paul Langbroek

MEMBER FOR SURFERS PARADISE

Hansard Thursday, 23 April 2009

VEGETATION MANAGEMENT (REGROWTH CLEARING MORATORIUM) BILL

Mr LANGBROEK (Surfers Paradise—LNP) (Leader of the Opposition) (2.55 pm): What a lovely, trite contribution from a city member of the Queensland parliament. The Premier has come in here and told us all about what I said five years ago. I stand by what I said five years ago. I look forward to explaining why I am happy to support my shadow minister and why the LNP will be opposing the legislation.

Mr Robertson interjected.

Mr LANGBROEK: I point out to the minister that the only deal that was done was the one that was done by the Premier when she announced on 15 March, in the middle of the election campaign, that this three-month moratorium would be brought in.

I want to go back to what I said on the day that has been quoted by the Premier—21 April 2004. I stated—

I also commend the intention of this bill to bring together all existing legislation on this issue. One of the past problems was that under an excess of legislation farmers did not know for certain what they could and could not do. This will change. The bill clearly outlines what can and cannot be done, providing a degree of certainty that previously was not present.

I was happy to support that legislation. What has happened since then is that we have had a number of goes at amending the vegetation management legislation. That amendment was when the current minister was the minister for this portfolio previously. Like groundhog day, he is back and having another go at changing vegetation management.

I put this to the minister. If this were an issue that the minister had carriage of in the intervening couple of years—for example, the issue of fluoride—and we were constantly coming back and saying, 'We have actually had a change in our position. We have had a different look at the science. We have had lots of scientific looks at it, but we are going to change our position—whether it is putting fluoride in the water at all or changing the concentration in the water,' would the minister not think that we would question the whole premise on which putting fluoride in the water was based?

That is the problem. Either the reason is science based or it is done for other reasons. That is the reason we will oppose this moratorium and oppose this bill. The government has said that these are the reasons that we should support this bill and is putting words in our mouths. It was the government that on 15 March made a commitment that from midnight on 7 April 2009 there would be a moratorium on the clearing of native vegetation within 50 metres of watercourses in priority reef catchments.

When I saw the map of the Burdekin River catchment—and I am the first to admit that I am from Surfers Paradise and I had no idea what the Burdekin River catchment looked like—tabled by the shadow minister, the honourable member for Callide, it showed me how easy it is for people in the south-east to say 'Okay, just make that part of the moratorium,' without any idea about the practical application of the law. That is surely what we are here in the parliament to do. We should be talking about the practical

application of law. We should be doing that as well as saying that suddenly the science has changed. Surely if we are coming back all the time and adjusting the Vegetation Management Act we must be acknowledging that there are problems with facets of the legislation that have already been brought in and they have to be improved. There were changes that needed to be made in August 2005. Here we are again now.

I am happy to stand by what I said in 2004. I am happy to be here supporting my shadow minister. The passion that he and other members of the LNP have on this issue will be on display in this debate.

We are all members of the Queensland family. No matter which portfolio or area one has an interest in—whether it is health, farming or infrastructure—if someone has such a passionate, strongly held view and they are a member of the Queensland family, why is it that we should be saying, ‘Your view is just wrong because it is and we’re going to do whatever we want,’ because that is clearly what is happening with the farming and rural community? We are saying to the rural and regional community that their views on things are not significant.

Mr Robertson: They’ve got to you. You’ve been bullied. You have been bullied! They’ve got to you, sunshine!

Mr Springborg: You hate them—hate them!

Mr LANGBROEK: With regard to the stakeholders that the minister has said that he has consulted with, there seems to have been more credence given to the contributions—

Mr Robertson interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Wendt): Order! Minister!

Mr Springborg interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! Member for Southern Downs, your leader is on his feet.

Mr LANGBROEK: The minister has met with key stakeholders, and reinforcing my point is that they are AgForce Queensland, the Queensland Farmers Federation, the WWF, the Wildlife Preservation Society, the Local Government Association of Queensland, Timber Queensland Ltd and industry and conservation groups, obviously including the Greens. I am not implying that the minister has consulted with the Greens, but I would think that the Greens have obviously had significant input into this policy and this moratorium.

The point is this: why is it that some of the comments of AgForce Queensland and the Queensland Farmers Federation are not taken into account in terms of whether this moratorium is needed? That is the issue when I talk about the Queensland family. These people are not saying, ‘Oh, we’re just saying this because we want to protect our own neck of the woods.’ That is the issue that is at the heart of this—as to whether a dirty deal has been done. I am more interested in the outcome.

As the shadow minister the honourable member for Callide said, legislation should not come in here for a political purpose. It should be for the purpose of improving the state and our outcomes. We know that the last election was won on the basis of jobs and creating more jobs, and clearly we know from all of the stakeholders that this legislation is not going to create more jobs. Rather, it is going to take away jobs in rural and regional areas. We know that it is going to cost jobs. We need the Premier to explain how this decision is going to help create 100,000 jobs. As we learnt this morning, maybe it will if they count the one-hour-a-week jobs that she spoke about this morning.

The agriculture sector has been one of the few industries still performing well in the current difficult economic climate, with work in rural industries a real option for mining workers who have lost their jobs in recent months. Our primary industries contribute as part of the Queensland economy \$13.137 billion. The primary industries sector was the state’s second most important export earner in 2007-08, contributing more than a quarter of total exports. There are approximately 30,000 businesses in Queensland that carry out agricultural activity and over 100,000 people employed in agriculture, forestry and fishing. Our primary producers are making a major contribution to food security for all Queenslanders in an era when food prices are predicted to rise internationally as suppliers struggle to keep up with surging demand for quality produce.

Let us look at what AgForce has had to say. It says that this represents a further clawback of Queensland’s current food and fibre production area. There is no doubt that we have this issue with food security. The world is saying that as the population increases we need to be able to keep producing more food. Queensland has shown that it can do that. It cannot do it if producers are going to have their areas taken away from them. The president of AgForce has said—

The loss in production will cost jobs in rural and urban areas because there is a downstream multiplier effect of 4 to 1 in process and agri-food industries. This will result in further degradation of the productivity and sustainability of the food & fibre sector—which generates \$13 billion for the Queensland economy ...

AgForce believes that the proposed changes are unacceptable because, as I have said, they will translate into a loss of jobs at a time when the government should be making decisions that create jobs, not reduce them. John Cotter said—

... building the economy should be at the forefront of every government policy decision now and in the future ...

That is what the Premier said the last election was about. She said to Queenslanders that they could rely on her and here we are, as we said this morning, not talking about jobs but taking jobs away with regard to vegetation management and other issues we have talked about this week, such as wild rivers and, of course, four-year parliamentary terms.

Mr Robertson: Oh, we're ready for the wild rivers matter.

Mr LANGBROEK: We have mentioned wild rivers.

Mr Robertson: And how do wild rivers matter?

Mr LANGBROEK: That also is not something that is going to increase jobs. John Cotter says—

Growing the state economy and supporting the performance of businesses is required at this time, not slashing it and hindering businesses from generating income and jobs for the entire state.

In 2004 it was this minister who had carriage of the Vegetation Management Amendment Bill. He assured industry that that legislation would provide surety for producers to manage their land in a locally relevant and sustainable manner, but today he has changed his mind. He just cannot keep doing that to people. He said—

This legislation is a historical line in the sand for how we, as a community, manage our often fragile landscapes and their natural limitations to ensure we remain economically and ecologically sustainable.

Although this legislation was hugely contentious at the time, producers accepted this line in the sand. They made appropriate adjustments to the way they ran their food and fibre production systems in order to be compliant with the new rules, but now the government is suggesting it wants to change those rules. AgForce believes that it is imperative that rural industry is not left to carry another burden of new restrictions on land management. It is unacceptable that a new layer of uncertainty is hanging over agricultural businesses when their sector has been acknowledged as productive, sustainable and a significant employer.

A regional forum was held in Rockhampton on 20 April. Those producers are going to have a fighting fund. They want a united movement of agricultural groups against these vegetation management changes. Better environmental outcomes are likely to be achieved when land management decisions are made in partnership with industry using genuine market based incentives for change. The minister, when meeting with these people, says they will have consultation, but too many of us on this side have seen consultation before and we know what it leads to. Those opposite do not listen to the consultation. Do not look at what they say; look at what they have done. People say that this is going to make the entire Brigalow Belt unviable for future agricultural production. There are also Labor electorates such as Bundamba where 3,000 to 4,000 jobs depend on beef production. These jobs will be endangered by this decision.

Mr Robertson: How?

Mr LANGBROEK: Because if they cannot run beef, then they may not be able to send the beef to the meatworks where the people work.

Mr Robertson: But it's cleared. It's cleared land.

Mr Springborg interjected.

Mr Robertson: It's cleared land.

Mr Messenger: You don't even understand your own legislation!

Mr LANGBROEK: Yes, the minister clearly does not understand his own legislation.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Wendt): Order!

Mr Robertson: Control your thugs!

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! Minister! Order!

Mr LANGBROEK: The Queensland Farmers Federation also says that locking up these vast tracts in agricultural areas is pointless and may in fact do more harm than good. The QFF's main point is to focus on these riparian buffers and point out that it achieves little that was not already being achieved or protected and it does not deliver any reef water quality outcomes as mature vegetation is really more about riverine bank stability, not a great outcome in terms of reducing sediment loads. Of course, our most productive farming lands are affected by this moratorium.

We see the Premier going back on her government's promise about drawing a line in the sand. How can we trust her to deliver 100,000 new jobs when those opposite will not honour a promise to uphold land rights? In spite of the fact that Queenslanders are losing their jobs, today in the House we see just how

important jobs are to the Premier. What is her first priority as the leader of this state? Political paybacks under the guise of vegetation management. It is an important issue—one we are certainly happy to talk about—but is it the most important priority of government during these times? As more and more Queenslanders stare down the barrel of unemployment, rebuilding the economy and restoring jobs should be at the forefront of this government's agenda, not honouring a preference deal.

As the member for Callide said, this is a payback bill. The government got 10 seats in exchange for selling out hundreds of thousands of Queenslanders who are affected by this new law. These people are not a threat to biodiversity; they are ordinary Queenslanders making a go of life on the land. This legislation will not protect jobs. It will not create one new job. Bringing forward this legislation at this time will only destroy jobs in rural and regional Queensland. Not only will it cost hundreds of jobs right across our state; it destroys some of our fundamental democratic principles. The legislation is retrospective. It removes all recourse to judicial review. Retrospective laws represent a blow to the pillars upon which our democracy and our legal system were built.

I have spoken about retrospectivity before and on a couple of rare occasions I have supported it. Former premier Wayne Goss got it, but this Premier does not. Page 65 of the Goss government's cabinet handbook states that rights should not be removed or liabilities imposed retrospectively unless there are exceptional circumstances. No matter which way the government spins it, paying off the Greens for their dirty little preference deal is not exceptional circumstances.

The Goss bible on legislative standards states that retrospective laws would be more easily accepted if they had a beneficial impact on those they seek to govern. It cannot be said that a bill that attaches criminal liability to innocent Queenslanders retrospectively will have a beneficial impact on anyone other than the 10 MPs who were dragged across the line on 21 March.

This bill removes a person's right to judicial review. It rubbishes the right to silence and the right against self-incrimination. This bill will destroy hundreds of jobs in regional Queensland, which is completely at odds with the Premier's 100,000 jobs farce. I will not support this bill.