



Speech by

Mandy Johnstone

MEMBER FOR TOWNSVILLE

Hansard Thursday, 8 October 2009

GREAT BARRIER REEF PROTECTION AMENDMENT BILL

Ms JOHNSTONE (Townsville—ALP) (5.07 pm): I rise to support the Great Barrier Reef Protection Amendment Bill 2009. This bill is just one page in a whole publication that is saving the Great Barrier Reef. While we are here to debate this bill today, it would be helpful to revisit the big picture, which is the reef water quality plan. What cannot be debated is that all levels of government—federal, state and local—have a responsibility to protect the reef and ensure its long-term conservation.

Those who live in North Queensland are very well aware of how important the protection of the reef is to local tourism, lifestyle and, most importantly, the environment. Townsville is one of the gateways to the reef. This gateway is for commercial tourist operators but also for the thousands of recreational boaters who live in North Queensland. And they live there exactly so they can take their families and friends out on the water during weekends and days off. We have over 11,000 registered boats in Townsville alone. Recreational boating is a serious contributor to our lifestyle and to our local economy. Indeed, the largest industry in the Great Barrier Reef catchment is tourism, which has 47,600 employees with a value in the vicinity of \$4.2 billion.

Contained within the electorate of Townsville are several tropical islands which form part of the reef park area—Magnetic and Great Palm Island being the two major ones. I have spoken in this House before about the natural values that these islands have and the contribution they make to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

Mr Reeves interjected.

Ms JOHNSTONE: It would be good to see Palm Island again. It is beautiful. I have seen a giant manta ray as I flew into Palm Island. It was swimming in the water just off the end of the airstrip. It is a beautiful place.

As many members would know, the Great Barrier Reef has been listed on the World Heritage register since 1981. I am pleased to be part of a government that works cooperatively with our federal government to ensure these values are protected for future generations. The reef water quality plan, known as the reef plan, is a joint initiative of the Queensland and Australian governments.

In 2002 the Queensland government commissioned an independent panel of experts to review the scientific evidence linking land use, water quality and reef degradation. What the report found was a clear indication that major land use practices in the reef catchment had led to accelerated erosion and greatly increased the delivery of sediment and nutrients to the reef over pre-1850 levels.

There were seven causes stated. All but two—urban development and development on acid sulfate soils—relate directly to agriculture. The two largest land uses in the three reef catchments detailed in this bill are grazing cattle and growing sugarcane. At the time this report was being published the Australian government asked the Productivity Commission to study and report on the importance of different industries in the reef catchment and examine and evaluate a number of policy options to address declining water quality entering the reef. The findings of these two reports form the basis of the reef plan and reinforce the case beyond doubt for halting and reversing the decline in water quality in the waterways entering the reef.

The reef plan in essence identified what was needed to be done and what partnerships were necessary to bring together and build on government policies and what industry and community initiatives were needed to achieve its goal—that is, to halt and reverse the decline in water quality entering the reef. The reef plan has many partners—Australian government departments, Queensland government departments, landholders, industry groups, regional natural resource management bodies, research organisations, local government, community groups and, of course, the traditional owners, the Indigenous people.

The Australian government has made \$200 million available over five years, including \$146 million in Reef Rescue incentive grants through the reef plan. When the reef plan was launched in 2003 it was made clear that its focus was to encourage good planning that would assist landholders to adopt profitable and environmentally sustainable best management practices. Then Prime Minister John Howard and then Premier Peter Beattie signed off on the reef plan, which clearly stated a need for immediate regulation to protect the reef from broadscale land uses and further regulation if there was a risk that voluntary approaches would fail to deliver significant water quality improvements. What has happened in the last six years and why has it been necessary to intensify the actions of the reef plan with regulation?

Mr Seeney interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Hoolihan): Order! I remind the member for Callide that the chair made a ruling. That is it. I call the member for Townsville.

Ms JOHNSTONE: In the first two years the reef plan partners diligently developed and promoted best management practice through education and extension, conservation agreements and covenants.

In 2005 the reef plan was audited, with a report given to the then Queensland Premier and the then Prime Minister. In 2007 the intergovernmental operational committee for the reef plan met with stakeholders. After some frank discussions it agreed that if the plan's goals were to be achieved the uptake of the best management practices would have to be accelerated. This was in no way a criticism of the scope or intentions of the reef plan. Indeed, it could and should be said that it simply reflected a lack of impetus and hence progress on the voluntary uptake of the improved management practices in the reef catchments needed for the reef plan to achieve its goals.

We know that some landholders have embraced new practices and have gone to substantial effort and expense to do so, and they should. They are held in high regard by their industry peers and the Australian people as protectors of our precious reef. How frustrating it must be for those farmers to have neighbours who will not or cannot change the way they have done things for the past 50 years.

For those who wish to change but need help, it is pleasing to note the Australian government's recent commitment to continued assistance under the five-year \$200 million Reef Rescue initiative. This is the appropriate complement to Queensland's five-year \$50 million regulatory package and \$125 million supporting programs. The government has very little choice here: not to regulate and accept the reef plan will not meet its goals or regulate and risk unpopularity amongst the regulated community that goes with making tough decisions.

This bill will allow the Bligh government to deliver on an election commitment that the people of Queensland said was a priority to them. Those opposite should remember that. We are delivering on protecting the environment, which is what the people of Queensland have asked us to do. I commend this bill to the House.