




Speech By
Robbie Katter

MEMBER FOR MOUNT ISA

**LAND PROTECTION LEGISLATION (FLYING-FOX CONTROL) AMENDMENT
BILL**

 **Mr KATTER** (Mount Isa—KAP) (8.36 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Land Protection Legislation (Flying-Fox Control) Amendment Bill 2012. The bill empowers landowners including state and local governments to take appropriate action in dealing with the health and lifestyle issues associated with concentrations of flying-fox colonies, particularly in urban areas. I speak with extensive personal experience on this issue as I grew up in Charters Towers when the numbers exploded in town. I now live in Mount Isa, where in recent years the numbers have again exploded to unmanageable and overwhelming numbers causing much stress for many sectors of the community.

The bats did not come to Mount Isa last summer so the minister has not heard as much from me as the member for Dalrymple. However, I feel there is still a strong chance they will return soon. It is probably worth mentioning that over the last 12 months I have also fielded many calls from Duaringa and other parts of Queensland. I was informed by these people that in the end the colonies left town but the people were under extreme stress. I believe they left of their own volition in the end. Unfortunately, other areas like Charters Towers are not so lucky. I observed that at Easter when I visited the town; the bat colonies were as bad as ever. It is with much regret that I recall the massive trees in the park that were over a hundred years old and were a feature of the town. It was a beautiful sight indeed around the rotunda. They have all now been cut down due to the impact of the bats and replaced with shade sales. To me that is a tragedy.

I also recall driving past a tree plantation on the outskirts of Charters Towers some years ago with my mother. When I asked who was growing a plantation and was it for harvesting the timber, I was informed that they were being grown under a council program with the intent of luring flying foxes out of their city. I believe this is the grand plan being rolled out now by many councils. This was an unsuccessful venture then and I fear it will be tried again and again at a cost to ratepayers.

When I served on the Mount Isa City Council I had extensive consultation with the former state government. We were working under the existing legislation that essentially offered the same solutions that were available up until the announcements were made today. I understand some of the statements made by the government today empower councils with more local autonomy in controlling this problem. That is a welcome decision and I commend the minister on this effort. I would chalk this up as a win for the strong representation of the member for Dalrymple. I implore the minister to consider going one step further to allow more practical measures to deal with this problem.

Dealing with this problem has been trivialised and overrun by environmental ideologies. Advocates have controlled debate to the point where the rights of humans have been made secondary to the rights of the flying fox. How else can you explain the story of a bloke in Yungaburra who leased his house in order to rent another house that was difficult for him to afford—all because he could not tolerate the bats in his yard and was unable to remove them.

This is not what I would call a free-for-all. To call it a free-for-all assumes that everyone is evil and wants to kill every single animal on their place. People just want the right to control their own

yard. They need that right. They do not have that right under existing legislation. If an animal is roosting there, people cannot move it.

The information I was last provided when on council was that numbers were difficult to accurately track due to the lack of historical records and the movement of colonies from region to region and from year to year. I was certainly not convinced of the science at the time or even put at ease by the lack of confidence in numbers in the north-west at the time. Anecdotally, people were saying that the numbers were greater than they had ever seen them.

That leads me to my next point. We need to recognise that we have artificially created environments for these animals, with limited predators, for them to thrive. What better example than the city of Mount Isa? Mount Isa has been around for only 90 years. There are no similar size forest areas for almost 500 kilometres. I have heard a lot of people saying tonight that we should just shoo the flying foxes out of town, but for Mount Isa there is nowhere to shoo them to. For a 500-kilometre radius all you have is withered old snappy gums and nowhere for a flying fox to roost. There is nowhere to push them. The solution being talked about now—creating an artificial forest out of town—I think is bordering on farcical. I certainly do not think it will work.

I am told that in the early days of both Charters Towers and Mount Isa there were mass removals of flying foxes, including culling, that helped control numbers. Evidently those numbers have built back up. I remember talking to a representative of the department when I was on council. One point that person made was, 'You cannot cull them because you will destroy numbers,' but the next point was, 'Nature always adjusts. If you reduce numbers they recreate and they come back.' I thought the statements were highly ambiguous.

The issue here is not the number of animals but the threat the animals pose in areas of human habitation. I believe that residents of Mount Isa who have had to keep their pets and kids inside for most of the summer because they have flying foxes roosting in their yard—this is not uncommon—should have the right to remove these animals, firstly in the most humane way possible. But the emphasis should be on practicality, not creating some ridiculous scheme of luring them away to some wonderful forest far removed from town.

I clearly remember discussing this issue with a representative of the department when they visited Mount Isa. After a long discussion about how we were to deal with these issues I was told that we had to cut out large sections of our trees at select times to shoo them away so they were not roosting—and that is if we had the permit! I pondered that point and thought, 'That is a wonderful solution for Mount Isa!' I think everyone appreciates that it is a pretty hot and nasty place in summer in terms of the sunlight and protecting your skin from cancer and shading your yard and house. But we were told that we would have to decimate our trees to reduce the roosting opportunities for the flying foxes. And you have to do that all around Mount Isa, because the only trees exist in yards and in public places. They are the only places for them to go. So one of the big solutions is to cut down trees in Mount Isa. I think that is pretty silly.

Later I rather cynically questioned this representative of the department about this big solution to create an alternative forest out of town and try to coerce or encourage these bats to move there in the fullness of time. So we would have to wait for five or 10 years for the trees to grow, and over the subsequent five or 10 years we would try to coerce or encourage these bats to go out of town. I asked, 'Do we know that this is going to work? We are going to make ratepayers pay for this over the next five or 10 years, and then we will have to wait another five or 10 years. So it could be 10 or 15 years before we know if this is even going to work. Are you absolutely sure this is going to work?' While we were out of the hearing of the others he said, 'Look, I don't know, but this is the legislation we have to work with.' That did not fill me with much confidence at all.

Mr Rickuss: You hate trees.

Mr KATTER: I in fact like trees very much. That is why I do not want all of the trees in Mount Isa to be cut down, which is one of the suggestions for how to manage flying foxes.

The management of this problem may be different for different areas. That is why this bill suggests that autonomy be given back to local councils. Again, I give credit where credit is due: I commend the government for at least providing that ability. This is a notion the Premier has publicly endorsed, and I commend him for that. Coupled with this autonomy, however, must be the ability of the state to stand in if councils are unable to act to successfully keep their residents safe from this problem. The focus of this issue must be the individuals and their right to provide a safe environment

for themselves and their families in their homes. The focus should be not the rights of the council or the state but the rights of individuals on their property.

This bill may be labelled a political fix or a short-term fix, but it is just practical. People who deal with this problem on the ground might say nice things to people in government to placate them, but everyone knows intuitively that there are only so many simple, practical ways to deal with this issue. The only other way is to throw a big heap of money at the problem.

I thought I had stepped into a *Monty Python* sketch when I was on holidays in Charters Towers at Easter. I was told that one of the plans of council was to create a bat park for a couple of million dollars. They had designed a park and had an artist's impression of it. I am told that in the impression there was a father with his daughter holding some coloured balloons, with kangaroos hopping past and bats flying overhead. I do not know about anyone else, but I find that ridiculous. That is something out of a *Monty Python* sketch, but these are the types of 'solutions' we are dealing with under the current legislation.

Legislation needs to go a bit further. People need to be able to remove flying foxes from their yards. It is very difficult in a place like Mount Isa, where there is no forest within a 500-kilometre radius. We need to amend these laws to give people more rights. I would much prefer that this issue was not discussed in the House or in the papers at all. I would prefer that people had the right to remove bats from their homes. I will be supporting this bill.