




Speech By
Dale Last

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

Record of Proceedings, 18 August 2016

VEGETATION MANAGEMENT (REINSTATEMENT) AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr LAST** (Burdekin—LNP) (12.25 pm): I rise to speak in opposition to this bill and in total disgust at those opposite who, in their desperate attempts to strike a deal with the Greens, have instead struck fear into the hearts of our hardworking Queensland farmers, the men and women on the land. In my role as shadow minister for agriculture, fisheries and forestry, I have talked and met with hundreds of farmers, graziers and landowners as well as industry representatives across the state. I have marched with them through the streets of Townsville and Brisbane, and I can say unequivocally that I stand shoulder to shoulder with them in opposing this draconian legislation currently being debated before this House.

When the Deputy Premier came into this place on 17 March this year, she was hell-bent determined to wreak havoc on our agricultural industry and ride roughshod over landholders in Queensland with her attempt to rush through this legislation without any consultation. I took phone calls from desperate growers in my electorate who were told by departmental officers to immediately stop any land clearing for which they had permits. Since March, farming and property development has been in limbo throughout Queensland. Any regrowth clearing and any new developments have been blocked. We saw five months of uncertainty leading up to this, and since March there has been another five months of chaos caused by this government which has blockaded development and brought our state to a standstill.

Let me be very clear: the LNP is united with our farmers on this issue. We have held forums across the state and we have been consulting with landowners, and the message is clear: our farmers are not going down without a fight. They might have their backs to the wall, but they are fighting for their livelihoods, they are fighting for their families and they are fighting to take this great state forward. As a proud North Queenslander, I can tell the House that we have big plans for development in the north, plans which sadly this government does not want to back, according to the Deputy Premier's malicious vegetation management laws.

I have spoken in this place previously about the importance of water infrastructure development in the north of the state and what this would mean in terms of agricultural development, and this bill before the House puts all that at risk. The hypocrisy shown by the environment minister and the Deputy Premier over this issue is breathtaking. This is a defining moment in Queensland's history. If these laws are passed today, it will see an end to agricultural development in this state and it will deliver a devastating, if not fatal, blow to our farmers. As they say, no farmers, no food. That is right. We need our farmers to produce the food we eat, and this bill before the House should be seen for what it is—a blatant attempt by this government to shut down the agricultural industry in Queensland in return for a few Green votes at the next election.

According to the *North Queensland Register*, the parliamentary committee's report held few surprises and served only to fuel landholder angst across Queensland for the proposed changes. Five key recommendations are listed in the report, including that the reverse onus of proof in relation to vegetation clearing offences be removed, that the accuracy of vegetation mapping be improved and that an assessment be undertaken on the full impact of the amendments to the environmental offset regime in Queensland. Well, it needs to be much more than that. This bill should be turfed out of this place, never to return. The Chairman of Property Rights Australia, Dale Stiller, said—

The Bill is unjust, flawed and attacks basic tenants of legal protections.

If the government does omit the reversal of the onus of proof it is simply removing one stick amongst others that will be used to beat the families who produce food for this government to achieve cheap political gain.

I cannot agree with him more. AgForce General President Grant Maudsley said—I would like to commend Grant for his vocal representation on behalf of our farmers—

AgForce maintains that these proposed laws will drive up food prices and stifle regional development, and should be scrapped altogether not just tinkered with around the edges.

Furthermore, AgForce Far North Branch chair Peter Spies is also quoted as saying, 'These vindictive, punitive and perverse laws proposed here need to be either withdrawn from parliament or defeated.' He also said—

Most farmers are environmentalists. They live and work with the land daily, unlike many of the goat-cheese eating Chardonnay hippies who have ill-informed opinions.

Many would not know how their food is produced and how farmers are also custodians and defenders of the land. AgForce took its Fair Laws for Farmers campaign throughout the state where our farmers gathered in the hundreds, taking the unprecedented step of marching on the Treasurer's office in Cairns, the office of the member for Mundingburra in Townsville, Parliament House here in Brisbane and the office of the Minister for Agriculture in Bundaberg. They are angry, and rightly so. Many of our farmers have been farming their land for generations. Their relationship with the land reflects their commitment to ensuring it is managed in a sustainable and appropriate manner. This bill before the House will not only impact on our farmers. As AgForce's Paul Burke said—

These changes will effect entire townships, every person in rural Queensland will be effected by these changes these proposed changes.

At a time when our population in rural and regional Queensland is dwindling that should sound alarm bells. Rural Queensland is the backbone of this state. Our farmers provide the produce that not only feeds our families but generates jobs and income for Queensland. The slogan 'every family needs a farmer' could not be more true. Our farmers and landowners are not environmental vandals; they are not criminals. They deserve our respect and they deserve to be respected by this government who have shown from day one that they have no intention of consulting or listening to them.

Queensland agriculture has the potential to grow from \$17 billion per year to \$30 billion over the next decade, but this growth will be stifled if the Palaszczuk government's proposed changes go ahead. The grand vision of Queensland's food bowl expansion and all the jobs associated with this industry's growth will effectively be cast to the wind like tumbleweed. I am deeply concerned that we have an agriculture minister here in Queensland who is not supporting the very industry she purports to represent. When I asked the minister at budget estimates what her position was on the bill and the impact it would have on our farmers, what was her response? It was that she does not deal in hypotheticals. I say to the minister: this is happening here and now and so I ask her again: will she stand up for our farmers in the industry that she has been chosen to represent as their minister? If she had any decency, if she had any commitment to our farmers, she would be standing up in this place today backing our farmers and telling the Deputy Premier to go back to West End where she belongs.

Our farmers are out there having a go through drought, floods and everything nature can throw at them. The last thing they need is more red tape, which is already suffocating them. As Charters Towers graziers Noline and Colin Ferguson told the public hearing in Townsville—

This opportunity is crucial to allow us to move forward ...

This small critical value-adding area will significantly increase the economic productivity of our property's enterprise without adversely affecting the adjoining natural environment.

The Fergusons want to boost their existing 18 hectares of irrigated fodder plot to 80 acres of irrigated lucerne and forage sorghum. That is right; they want to expand and grow their family business in a responsible and sustainable manner, and this bill puts those plans at risk. When talking about

opportunities around high-value areas like the dryland farming project on Olive Vale station, Cook Shire Council CEO Tim Cronin said—

If we can get these areas up and running and productive, it is employment and economic development that will help Cook shire become viable. At the moment we are simply not.

An article quotes Cynthia and Pius Sabag from Tully as saying—

'It is not just about land, biodiversity, the Reef and endangered species," Mrs Sabag said.

'It is about real people—ordinary hard working Australian farmers like my husband and me, with real lives, real hopes for the future and real plans for their farming businesses.

Brian Rowling said at the Lakeland rally, 'Our children's children will be paying for this for the rest of their lives if we stop the tree clearing and stop the development of the far north.' This state was built on the back of agriculture. I have lost count of the number of forums and conferences I have attended in the past 12 months which talk about the potential benefits this state could reap from the development of agribusiness. All that is now at risk for the sake of a few Green votes. I urge those members opposite to do the right thing by Queensland, to do the right thing by our farmers and to vote against this legislation here today. At the end of the day we need fair laws for farmers.