




Speech By
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**VEGETATION MANAGEMENT (REINSTATEMENT) AND OTHER LEGISLATION
AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Mr KATTER** (Mount Isa—KAP) (8.55 pm): I rise to speak on the Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. I was on the committee that looked at the bill, so I have good insight on a number of aspects of this bill. Coming from a rural area of Western Queensland, I see firsthand the impacts of something like this on the people who live in the environment that will be affected.

I refer to the issue of natural justice as it applies to this bill. Much has been said about the reversal of the onus of proof. The committee recommended that that be taken out of the bill. An interesting point was made by Law Society president Bill Potts during the committee hearing. He said that someone, through mistakes on a map, clearing some trees that they should not have and being arrested is akin to someone coming home from a week's holiday, finding a dead body in their back yard and being locked up straightaway because they are responsible for it. Putting it in that context makes it clear how unfair this is.

Some of the clearing activity I have been privy to in my time is not broadscale; it is fairly discreet. That contrasts with the mining developments and commercial developments that we see all the time that certainly are not discreet. It is logical that people who choose to live on the land in remote areas, away from the luxuries of metropolitan areas—they choose to live in isolation, away from their families, because they enjoy living in the environment—will care for it, at the very least as much as anyone else but probably in most cases more than anyone else. They are going to believe in sustainability and will want to ensure the best health of that land. Putting these responsibilities on land managers who will be performing vegetation management activities when there are so many flaws in the mapping does not make good sense and demonstrates that this is very poor legislation.

Much has been said about the SLATS report. The report showed that 296,000 hectares were cleared, while tree coverage increased by 437,000 hectares. That was debunked by the panel of academic experts who appeared before the committee. To my recollection, they said words to the effect, 'There are two different types of analysing the data. We made sure we knew how one was done with the clearing but the other one is not as accurate and reliable. Where the tree growth has expanded, it is not as reliable—we cannot rely on that data—but we are keeping a good handle on where they are clearing.'

Clearing has already been raised, but mulga is included in that. Mulga is cleared for drought fodder and it springs back up like the hairs on a dog's back. If that is being thrown into the mix in the middle of a drought, that does not make sense. According to this report, the most clearing happened in the Paroo shire, the Barcoo shire and the Boulia shire. It is such a wonderful effort for Boulia shire to make it into that report because you would have to drive about 50 kays to find a tree! Whatever bulldozer

was doing the clearing there must have run out of diesel before it got to its second or third tree, but I do not know how Bouliia even made that list. I am so glad that Bouliia even had some trees to report!

There are misconceptions about vegetation. I am a layman and do not profess to know much at all, but I learnt some interesting things growing up. I have told this story in the House before, but dad told me one day about Burdekin Downs—the other day I was reading a history book on Queensland about Burdekin Downs—Fanning Downs and those stations outside Charters Towers. They are called downs country because they are open country. It is all moderately and, in some cases, heavily timbered country now, but for everyone who grew up there that is how they knew it. It was downs country when it was first settled. Back in the day the DPI had data and a way to analyse that, but there are a lot more trees there now than when it was first settled. The landscape is changing immensely. There have been tree surveys in the Etheridge shire showing heavy encroachment of trees over a large number of years, not just in the last four or five years.

A really practical and easy way to understand it is when the first Australians were out there a big part of their land management and the way they got around was burning. There would be big hot fires. They would burn suckers and let the bigger trees grow. That formed the landscape that we are used to. One residual outcome is that the Gouldian finch, which is one of our prized beautiful birds in the Etheridge shire, is endangered now because not as much burning is happening but they browse and thrive in that burnt landscape. Because the land is being 'managed' better now and there are not the big fires to rip through everything, a lot of effort is going on to preserve the Gouldian finches. The landscape is always changing and it is very difficult to just cut in a baseline. You cannot turn it back from the way it is and all of the clearing has been done. What we are talking about here is not environmental devastation and in most areas is very discreet.

In the gulf and cape another factor that is really important for people to understand is that there are a lot of commercial barriers to clearing. It is really expensive. I think one person at one of the hearings said that it costs \$300 an hour to operate one of his dozers and said, 'I've got to think really hard before I turn the key on that because it costs a lot of money and I've got to get that money back from cattle production.' It is not like everyone sits there with big piles of money ready to bulldoze the hell out of everything on their property. It is an expensive business and you have to think really hard. Coupled with that, a real culture has developed out there with primary producers in that they know that times have changed. They know that the environmental groups are a very strong political force and that there are laws in place now that restrict what they can do. There is a culture of fear out there already, so most people are very reluctant to go down that road. You have to get your place survey mapped and get the vegetation mapping. It is a lot of work and it is a lot of expense, so there are already a lot of commercial barriers to stop people from clearing.

With regard to a lot of that country in the gulf and cape, the average size is 50,000 or 100,000 acres. In most cases these people do not want to be farmers. If you are a cattle grazer you do not want to become a farmer and tomorrow do 20,000 acres of farming. It would be very difficult for anyone to just change like that. Instead they might do 1,000 acres or 500 acres for a hay paddock to feed their weaners in the dry, and that is a completely different proposition. Some 500 to 1,000 acres of 50,000 to 100,000 acres equates to one per cent or two per cent on most of those places for high-value agriculture. If I had a scaled map of Queensland as tall as me here, you would not be able to pick those out. They would be tiny little dots on the map around Queensland and be barely discernible. That is what we are talking about in these areas. It is not big chains going through the forests clearing everything and koalas running off in fear. In most cases you are talking about discreet practices.

There is another practical point that did not come through during the committee process, and I say this with all due respect to the academics who fronted the committee. We went to Blair Knuth's property at Burdekin Downs near Charters Towers and saw the false sandalwood when it thickens up. It was not there 50 or 100 years ago when the first settlers were there, but all of this false sandalwood has come up now. He cannot go in there and tidy that up now, but where he is able to clear that up the landscape looks terrific. There is just as much biodiversity and animals on that land, but there was no grass under the dense false sandalwood that clusters up and there was erosion occurring. If these laws are passed, he would not be allowed to touch that up and clean it up. I cannot understand for the life of me how that is an improvement on the management. Blair does not want to pull everything on the place; he just wants to touch that bit and do 100 acres of high-value agriculture and employ a few more people and I think we would all benefit from that and I do not think anyone would ever notice, not even anyone on the reef. That is the extent to which most people want to go. From a practical sense you really have to live it and be out there and meet these people and understand it to be able to pass judgement on it. It is really difficult to pick up these nuances if you have not spent time in those areas.

Another practical point that was made was if you are up in the cape or in the gulf you are carting hay in during the dry period which is introducing weed species from all around Australia—you would be carting hay from everywhere—whereas if you had 500 to 1,000 acres for your hay paddock you would not have to buy hay and introduce all of those weeds. Weeds to me are a much bigger environmental problem than run-off. We had zero hectares of prickly acacia in the sixties. There is now talk of 20 million hectares of prickly acacia, and that is a real problem for all of us and there are some real environmental impacts from that. Feral cats in Western Queensland are a disgusting scourge on the environment. I would hate to think of the number of species that are under threat from feral cats in my area. These issues really do need to be addressed and the impacts they are having are very visible.

With regard to the Great Barrier Reef—and, again, I am no expert and everyone cares about that—when I am told that Blair Knuth cannot clear that little bit of false sandalwood under these laws and it is causing more erosion if he cannot clear it, it does not make sense to me. That needs to be changed. I made the point earlier about fire management. Fires were a natural part of life. Even when the white settlers first moved in, fires were a lot more prevalent. You would burn the country late in the year to try and bring up the green grass and to remove all of the suckers to let the big timber grow. It was a practice performed by the first Australians and then again by the first settlers, but now there are roads, firebreaks and rural fire brigades everywhere. If lightning strikes somewhere or someone throws a cigarette out the window and a big fire starts or if someone's fire gets away when they are doing controlled burns, in the old days it went through the whole gulf and wiped it out but now that does not happen or it rarely happens. The landscape is transforming even in the time that it has been developed, so it is very difficult to say, 'We need to keep it as it is now,' because what it is now is severely different to what it was 50, 100 or 150 years ago.

The key point is that we need people on the land who can manage the land themselves. We have to trust them because in most cases most of these people are trying to do the right thing. If we had no laws and no regulations at all, I am sure the land would not be too much worse off and I reckon it would be about the same because there is not a huge impetus to clear every tree that is out there. In some cases—and I speak only really with authority on the gulf or the cape—there are some opportunities for them to progress if a lot of those barriers are removed, but if we tighten up the system with these laws nothing will happen and we will remove that potential from those people.

In many cases, in a lot of these parcels of land in the north the property owners just want a little hay paddock. It is their big development plan for them to move forward in the future. If the government removes from them that right to have that hay paddock, that is pretty cruel. These people are good land managers. They are doing nothing wrong. They are doing a good job for their country and for their state by being producers. In most cases, they are doing a really good job in looking after the environment on their place. They are probably as good or better custodians of the land than any of us would be. For them to be told, 'We are going to remove any right that you have to develop your place,' that is pretty cruel.

A lot has been said about the development along the Flinders and Gilbert rivers. In my mind, there is no doubt that, even if these laws are passed tonight, in 10 or 20 years a big foreign company will want to bulldoze the hell out of the Gilbert or the Flinders and it will have the political muscle to be able to do that. Some farming families along the Gilbert would love the opportunity to do a little bit of irrigation and they would do a really good job of it. They care for the land. They have lived there all of their lives. Their farms have been in their families for generations. Under this bill, they will not be able to do a thing, especially in the Gilbert where there is a lot of timber.

Those farmers have so much potential to offer this state. At a time when the mining industry is declining and we are experiencing difficulties in the economy, we have to turn to agriculture. It is offering all of these positive signs of moving forward. We have to be very careful how we manage the opportunities for these farmers. If the government removes those opportunities, although it might not seem like much, what it will deny the state in terms of growth and addressing our debt problems is criminal. If the government denies those farmers the right to develop their land in these areas, basically, it is not only doing the wrong thing by them but also doing the wrong thing by the people who will inherit this state long along after we have left. This area has great potential for this state and any agricultural development there can be done in a sustainable manner. Like I said, it will be like pinpricks on a map. You could barely make it out while flying over in a plane at 20,000 feet. If that area is developed, it would have a lot to offer the state. Like I said, there are commercial barriers to a lot of this development, but it is the only opportunity those people have to progress in their lifetime.

There are wonderful opportunities in that area. Ninety-eight per cent of the cape is remnant forest. In the past, a lot of Queensland has been cleared—and that is good—but the cape has never really had that opportunity. We never made it up that far in terms of development. Every year, small parts of it are

being developed and, in many cases, for the better. A lot of areas in the cape have been overrun by weeds and have thickened up and, because no burning has taken place, it can end up being in a worse condition than when it was when it was first settled. It can be misleading to think that development of an area is a bad thing. In many cases, it could mean that the country is better off. We need to allow people to use some of that 98 per cent of Cape York that is not developed. Even if we let people take only one or two per cent of that area to be used as hay paddocks, that can mean a lot to them. It can mean that their properties are viable. It means employment. As I said, bulldozers will not be moving into that area overnight. They are not going to pull up everything overnight but, if we as a parliament deny them the opportunity to develop in the future I think that is a terrible injustice to deliver to the people who will inherit that land from us.

In closing, the greatest impetus that I have heard for passing this bill is to save the Great Barrier Reef. I love the Great Barrier Reef. In my lifetime, I have been out there probably four or five times. Ironically, I think that most of the people who would be affected by this legislation would frequent the reef more often than people in the city who would be strongly in favour of this bill passing. That does not mean that people in rural areas care any more or less for the Great Barrier Reef. I just make that point.

No-one has a mortgage on the environment. Those people who live out in rural areas do not, but neither do those people who live in the city. We have to have a bit of trust in the people who live in rural areas. They are not all vandals and they should not be treated like criminals. We really should be compassionate for a sector of Queensland that is often forgotten. They do not get a lot of representation. I do not think they ask for a lot. A lot of the time they like to be left alone. I think they can do a pretty good job in managing their land if we leave them alone to do that.

Obviously, we will be doing everything we can to oppose this bill. I think that it would be a huge backward step for Queensland if the bill were passed. A lot of what this bill is trying to achieve has already been achieved. Already, in my adulthood a culture of fear and reservation has developed in rural areas. We could probably throw all of these regulations out the window, completely remove all regulations on clearing, and we would not see a great deal more clearing than what we saw yesterday, or last year. Those days of clearing are over. That happened in the past. There are commercial limitations, but it would mean a lot to people in rural areas to have the opportunity to develop their land.