




Speech By
Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Record of Proceedings, 17 March 2016

**VEGETATION MANAGEMENT (REINSTATEMENT) AND OTHER LEGISLATION
AMENDMENT BILL, REPORTING DATE**

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (10.40 pm): I will not take up the time of the House in trying to prosecute the bill tonight, but I do want to talk about the proposed report date. I look to my fellow committee members across the chamber—the members of the Agriculture and Environment Committee—who are now being asked to report in four weeks on this bill. How is it really proposed that we can deal with this legislation? These outrageous time frames are unacceptable. I say to those members who are not looking me in the eye because they do not want to look me in the eye: we have already pushed back the Racing Integrity Bill by two weeks because we could not cope with that, and now we are talking about a four-week time frame for this bill which includes Easter and the school holidays.

I say to the members for Whitsunday, Gladstone and Ipswich West: are we going to have Easter at your place in order to deal with this legislation in four weeks, because that is what this means? We are already meeting tomorrow about legislation that has been made urgent—the environment protection legislation that we need to deal with for the Townsville refinery. It is very important legislation, and we are supportive of the concepts the Minister for Environment has introduced. But four weeks? This is important legislation which goes to the heart of a lot of fundamental, ideological views and we need to give our committees, constituents and the people of Queensland an opportunity to investigate the true ramifications of it. I ask the House to consider that.

I will not support this time frame over the Easter break and school holidays. I agree with you, Mr Speaker, that the legislation needs adequate review, and I agree with your sensible comments on appropriate review. If members think we will get an appropriate review with this time frame, they need to think again because we need time to consider this. I do not understand why after 14 months of the government's legislative agenda—and this is clearly an election commitment; it has to be acknowledged—we have a four-week time frame. This is not a secret. I acknowledge that the government has been talking about this for a long time, but we need those who are dealing with legislation on vegetation management to acknowledge that it has already stalled the vegetation management process in Queensland. The courts are already stalled under the SARA process that the Labor government has already introduced. There are many examples where lawyers are now having to prosecute cases in the courts where legislation has stalled. There is clearly no urgency to this motion. The government already has the framework and the departments under its control. It has its agenda for Queensland so the urgency is not substantiated.

What some opposite do not realise is the current framework and legislation allows clearing to happen for irrigated and high-value agriculture. This process needs a permit and this process is very rigorous. There is no urgency, as the member for Bulimba, Ms Farmer, has alluded. These processes are already in place. There is no urgency for this motion to be passed. We must look at 30 June as a

realistic time frame for the committee to deliver on this issue. If we are going to bring these stakeholders together, can anyone in their wildest dreams believe that four weeks will be enough time to consider this legislation?

Land suitability has to be demonstrated under the current legislation, regardless of what the government has introduced. The DNRM has soil mapping processes, and land suitability studies have to be carried out in accordance with the guidelines for agricultural land evaluation and associated land evaluation frameworks. This is very intensive and specialist. It is very complicated. We must have the time to review this. Only suitable land can be applied to be cleared. Every region is different. We cannot have a one case fits all. Some of us live on the coast; some of us live in the west.

In my region the areas are relatively small, ranging from two hectares, under the current legislation, and for smaller businesses it is worthwhile to clear in order to expand their businesses. This should not be discouraged. These farmers are providing food and fibre for the region, and any changes to that would be retrospective. The media and populist politics will focus on the broadscale clearing that has happened predominantly out west and up north which has been clearing vegetation for grazing and fodder because of the drought.

Members of our committee who travelled to centres with me to look at the DRAS will remember that cows were knocking down fodder in the mulga country to feed their stock. I ask them to take a minute to remember the stories we heard about cows knocking down trees themselves. We have worked really well as a committee, and I acknowledge the bipartisan way we have worked over the last 14 months. We have had some good results as a committee and I appreciate their work, but please do not disregard the work we did when we travelled out west and looked at the effects of drought. Please do not let the emotion creep into the issues of drought and the way the mulga has to be used, and has been used, to feed animal welfare issues of stock in the west. This is not about wholesale broadscale clearing. The Minister for Environment loves statistics, but there are also contrary statistics that can be put up such as those of Dr Burrows, who has been mentioned in the debate.

I want to make sure that the people who will be voting on this time frame understand that the application process has significantly tightened under the current VMA. There are technically suitable staff in the department who are assessing this. It is not wholesale clearing, as has been presented tonight. I acknowledge those departments which have worked under the new VMA which have strived to ensure that we have good outcomes for Queensland.

Land clearing has been shown to only occur on a broadscale level. This is certainly not the case in South-East Queensland or my bioregion. It is smaller operators trying to improve their business and expand on suitable land. These landowners are not environmental vandals, as has been presented tonight, and I take offence on their behalf. I look forward to the agriculture minister in Bundaberg and those members of our committee who have regional seats looking their constituents in the eye and explaining why they feel that they are environmental vandals. It is not fair and it is not just.

It is interesting to see that the Palaszczuk government is supporting the Northern Australia infrastructure legislation.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! Member for Burnett, I urge you to come back to the matter we are debating, which is the time frame.

Mr BENNETT: In closing, I ask that those opposite, particularly the members of my committee, think about how we are going to deal with this very important issue. A four-week time frame is completely untenable and completely disrespectful to the people who will be affected by this. I urge members to consider the 30 June amendment that has been proposed.