




Speech By
Hon. Dr Steven Miles

MEMBER FOR MURRUMBA

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VEGETATION MANAGEMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Hon. SJ MILES** (Murrumba—ALP) (Minister for Health and Minister for Ambulance Services) (2.55 pm): Early in the morning of 19 August 2016, the last time we debated these laws, I can remember sitting alone in my office. I could hear opposition members celebrating elsewhere in the precinct. I could hear them arrogantly slapping each other's backs and of course I felt defeated. As then environment minister I had put everything I had into Labor's efforts to stem escalating land clearing. I did that because after speaking with scientists all the way up the Queensland coast I was convinced that only by protecting tree cover on river and creek banks could we stem the hundreds of thousands of tonnes of sediment polluting the Great Barrier Reef, blocking the light and suffocating the coral.

I had travelled to Germany with the Deputy Premier and then federal environment minister—

Opposition members interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Stevens): Order! Members on my left.

Dr MILES: I had travelled to Germany with the Deputy Premier and then federal environment minister, Greg Hunt, to convince UNESCO to keep the reef on the World Heritage List. Ultimately, it was the long-term sustainability plan signed by Hunt and me and supposedly supported by the LNP that convinced the global community that Queensland would act to save the reef. I knew we had to implement that plan, which included a commitment to stem land clearing.

I had also travelled the state and seen the destruction of broadscale land clearing. I had seen some of the tens of millions of native animals left homeless every year. I had also seen shocking data that Queensland was considered the only developed economy that was a global deforestation hotspot; that Queensland was responsible for 90 per cent of the nation's land use emissions; that clearing in Queensland for just two years more than wiped out the entire billion dollar Emissions Reduction Fund, the only—if inadequate—policy proposal from the Turnbull government to meet their own Paris treaty greenhouse gas emissions targets. I knew that defeat that night ensured almost three-quarters of a million more native forests would be cleared, more than 34 million native animals would die, hundreds of thousands of tonnes of sediment would land on the reef and more than 289 million tonnes of CO₂ would be in the atmosphere.

Around the same time I visited the same reef I first snorkelled on. In 2010 I had taken my son, Sam, there and Kim as well, who was pregnant with Aidan at the time. It was magnificent. We swam with a giant turtle. I was hooked. By 2017 at that spot underwater in the Whitsundays the LNP's vandalism was laid bare. Dive operators told me they did not even take tourists there anymore. That reef was like a graveyard. The coral had been bleached once and then for the first time ever what had recovered was bleached again. Cyclone Debbie had torn the coral to pieces, leaving it in crumbs on the ocean floor. Then the sediment from that same storm settled on top like dust and cobwebs in a haunted house. It was haunting.

That night when we last considered these laws I also knew that the LNP's victory would be temporary. That night I knew that Labor would go on to win the next election with enough votes to deliver the laws we are debating here today. Of course I resolved to do everything I could to make sure that happened, not because I thought land clearing would decide the election—it would clearly be an issue, a clear differentiator between the parties thanks to the Premier's leadership, the centrepiece of Labor's election platform—but more so because I know that at every election since 1998 Queenslanders have voted for governments committed to native forest protections, and that includes 2012.

Let us not forget that in the lead-up to the 2012 election the LNP accepted that Queenslanders wanted to retain their land-clearing laws. They promised not to change them. When they broke that and many other promises they were voted out. That is why that night and that vote were so important. Queenslanders have never voted for a party that is committed to land clearing, and that night the LNP finally destroyed what was left of the Liberals and with it their electoral prospects. They took the final lurch to the extreme right. They lost all touch with the majority of Queenslanders, and that is what we saw play out on election night.

Queenslanders from the south-east all the way to the state's north rejected the new, extremely right-wing LNP. In the city and the regions the LNP vote collapsed, but instead of accepting that outcome the LNP has doubled down their support of fringe views over the views of Queenslanders. They have tried to pitch it as city versus country, but the country is not with them either. Their campaign with grazier union AgForce has tried to mislead Queenslanders and pretend that broadscale land clearing is mostly undertaken by 30-something professional women.

They have argued that the sky will fall if these laws are passed, despite the fact that agricultural production increased under previous incarnations of these laws. Some opposites have even suggested that we will all starve. In doing so they have done a disservice not just to this state but also to the farmers they purport to defend. Queenslanders have not fallen for it: they did not last year, they have not this year and they never will. Queenslanders know that we can have sustainable agriculture and protect the Great Barrier Reef and do our fair share to address climate change and keep native forests for our unique native wildlife. Not only can we, but we must. That is what these laws will deliver.

I want to thank and congratulate the members for Stafford and Algester for their work in bringing these laws back to the House. I want to thank the members and supporters of WWF, the Wilderness Society and the Queensland Conservation Council who campaigned so hard to see this bill pass. I want to thank the thousands of citizens who made submissions and the committee for considering them, but most of all I want to thank Queenslanders for electing a government willing to do what it takes to protect the reef, our native forests and the native wildlife that call those forests home.