




Speech By
Michael Berkman

MEMBER FOR MAIWAR

Record of Proceedings, 23 February 2023

LAND AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr BERKMAN** (Maiwar—Grn) (4.46 pm): I rise to make some comments on the Land and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. This is one of those bills that makes me sigh and, I am sure, provoke a bit of an eye roll from a lot of members. This is one of those bills where the government decides that it is going to simultaneously amend a bunch of different pieces of legislation irrespective of how clumsily they fit together and how unrelated the base legislation might be. The cynic in me feels sometimes like the government does this as a way to sneak through unpopular or controversial amendments and one could be forgiven this time for thinking this is precisely what is happening in this bill. There are plenty of minor and uncontroversial amendments that are proposed here, but there are a few that we cannot support, including provisions to streamline the privatisation of public land and those proposed to reduce transparency around ecosystem conservation status.

I will start with those land privatisation provisions. For a so-called progressive government, Queensland Labor really does love selling off public land, and this bill will make it easier for it to do so. Disguised behind the rhetoric of modernisation and efficiency, the amendments in this bill allow the government to proactively offer to convert leasehold land to freehold. Right now it is an applicant-driven process. It makes sense that a lessee who has an interest in obtaining freehold title over land would themselves hold the onus to apply for and to convince the government to give it to them, but what this bill assumes is that the government will itself also want to regularly sell off public land and so under that assumption we need a mechanism to facilitate and streamline that process.

I have to say that I find it hard to trust the government's assurances that it will only sell off land if it is not delivering public benefit. This is the same government that apparently deems it in the public interest to approve new coal and gas leases. It sees fit to sell off public housing while 50,000-odd people linger on the public housing waiting list or to privatise national parkland via commercial long-term leases.

All of these steps are notionally in the public interest or somehow otherwise justifiable in the government's eyes. Their idea of public benefit seems to be pretty readily interchangeable with whatever benefits the wealthiest people or those with the best paid lobbyists in the state. Big grazing businesses are understandably very excited about this change. Ultimately they want to see all leases effectively converted to freehold or at least to perpetual leases. They see this bill as a step in that direction. Unlike this government, the Greens do not support giving away public land to mining corporations and multimillionaire cattle barons. This is land that should belong to all Queenslanders and should remain in the hands of Queenslanders. We are in the middle of a housing and a climate crisis, with Queensland families paying hand over fist for basic needs. It is simply baffling that this government's priority in the first sitting week of the new parliamentary year is to make it easier to sell off public assets to the likes of Gina Rinehart.

The bill would also list regional ecosystem conservation status on the Vegetation Management Regional Ecosystem Description Database, or REDD, rather than the Vegetation Management Regulation which means that the status can change without any democratic oversight or public scrutiny.

In their submission on the bill several organisations, including the Wilderness Society and the Environmental Defenders Office, raised concerns that this will unnecessarily reduce transparency and rigour. Queenslanders who farm on, do business in or take holidays in the various grasslands, rainforests, savannas and bushland can reasonably expect changes like this to be regularly published and potentially challenged and debated by their elected representatives.

Instead, this bill provides for unelected departmental officers to silently update the data each year with no real checks or balances. Queensland's farmers, tourism operators, tourists themselves, environmentalists and conservationists or just everyday Queenslanders who enjoy our state's extraordinary biodiversity all have an interest in changes like this. Allowing such changes to just vanish in our state's bureaucracy means the public will be kept in the dark and may not be aware of such changes of conservation status. We have already seen the way this government exploits the news cycle to hide embarrassing information, from the Friday afternoon coalmine approvals to releasing land clearing data the day before New Year's Eve. If that is how the government treats vegetation management data then environmental organisations are well within their rights to be concerned about this bill and the changes it makes to conservation status changes.

Looking at the provisions on stock route changes, we support the changes that enable local governments to keep all revenue received from application fees and permit fees, water facility agreements and fines paid by cattle producers to better cover the costs councils incur in managing and administering the stock route network. Currently councils can only retain part of the permit fees for stock routes. This change will still leave them with much less in the way of funding than what is actually required. The current framework is leaving Queensland local governments out of pocket, in particular with interstate producers travelling here to feed their stock with very minimal costs. We support councils being able to waive fees during times of drought or economic hardship, but we would like to see higher user-pay fees to manage stock routes and a time limit before producers can sell cattle after using stock routes for feed to stop big operators exploiting public land in Queensland only to leave and sell their stock elsewhere.

To conclude, there are aspects of the bill the Queensland Greens do support, but we cannot support streamlining provisions for the privatisation of public land, giving public assets to billionaires and scaling back of oversight and transparency over ecosystem conservation status.