



Speech by

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**MEMBER FOR IPSWICH**

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Hansard 29 May 2003

**VEGETATION [APPLICATION FOR CLEARING] BILL**

**Ms NOLAN** (Ipswich—ALP) (4.05 p.m.): I rise to support the Vegetation (Application for Clearing) Bill brought to the House by the Minister for Natural Resources. In speaking today I hope to add a bit more sense to the debate than we have heard so far from the member for Callide who still has the sort of 'head in the sand, knock it all down, there is no problem with land clearing in Queensland' approach. From the member for Warrego we have heard the intriguing Wilson Tuckey approach that people chop down the trees for the good of the other trees.

What we need to understand is that natural ecosystems like native forests are in a state of balance, and they can be altered in order to make them productive. They can be altered so that cattle can be grazed and they can be altered so that timber can be taken out. They can be altered to make them productive in white fella terms, but they cannot be altered to make them better in an ecological sense. Their natural state, ecologically, is uncleared. That is the way, in an environmental sense, they are meant to be. So they can be made productive, but they cannot be made to be healthier ecosystems than they were before they were touched.

I think that is one of the fundamental points that the National Party is failing to understand. They are mixing up productive with environmentally sound. It is not that hard, but I would hope that out of this debate we begin to get there. In the debate today what I really want to talk about is the history of the vegetation management debate that we have been having in Queensland for a very, very long time.

There has been a natural progression in community attitudes over some time, and there has been a natural progress in the Beattie government's approach to vegetation management and the associated legislation, with a central theme all the way through of responsibility and reform. For many years those opposing clearing in Queensland were unable to back their beliefs with enough credible science for governments to act, or they were unable to make their voices heard. However, the work of these visionaries against overwhelming opposition and the kind of head in the sand stuff that we see from the opposition helped Queensland build its current understanding of the effects of land clearing in Queensland and has made a significant contribution to our comprehensive vegetation management framework.

As early as 1872 the Acclimatisation Society of Queensland wrote to the colonial secretary to voice his concerns about overcutting and its likely effect on climate. I will make that point again: 1872. So people have been talking about this stuff for 130 years, but it still has not got through to the member for Callide. I do not know how long it is going to take, but we have been talking about the fact that chopping down the trees can affect the climate for more than 130 years.

**Mr Schwarten:** You can't do much with concrete once it is set.

**Ms NOLAN:** Indeed. I think the minister has got it.

In the 1930s Queensland's first ever director of forests, Edward Swain, was sacked for his vehement opposition to broadscale clearing of hardwood forests in far-north Queensland. He brought into question the findings of a royal commission that found there were 'too many trees' in the area, claiming it was rigged. But today that is exactly what we have heard from the member for Warrego. Despite the fact that in the 1930s we knew this stuff was garbage, we have heard here today that there are too many trees in the forest—and a terrible thing it is, too!

In the 1960s, and up to as recently as 1985, the brigalow land development scheme encouraged clearing in what we now know is a fragile bioregion with many endangered ecosystems. With this historical background it is inevitable that many land-holders will be opposed to further changes in the regulation of vegetation management, and that is understandable. I do not know if it is understandable on the part of members of parliament, who should know better, but maybe it is understandable for some land-holders. But our scientific understanding has improved and community attitudes have changed.

This government would be remiss if it did not act on scientific understanding and changes in the community's attitude to ensure that we protect the interests of all Queenslanders now and in the future. Our current vegetation management framework is built on a firm base, going back to the Land Act 1962, which required permits for clearing on leasehold land. The updated Land Act in 1994 foreshadowed regulatory changes in land management, and the Vegetation Management Act was proclaimed in 2000, protecting native vegetation on freehold land. This legislative framework supports a broader, community focused approach, including the ministerial advisory committee on vegetation management, regional vegetation management committees and a broad range of other policies and tools.

It is only necessary to look at the picture of clearing presented by the State Landcover and Trees Study to see how much things have changed with the Beattie government's vegetation management approach. SLATS monitors the overall woody vegetation cover and reports on the extent of land clearing in Queensland. We have already seen the effects of panic clearing. In the 12 months immediately preceding the proclamation of the Vegetation Management Act 2000, SLATS data showed that some 758,000 hectares of vegetation was cleared. That rate halved the following year, to 378,000 hectares, in the first year that the Vegetation Management Act was operational. When we look at those figures it seems clear that the potential for panic clearing is very real. If the government had not acted responsibly by instituting a halt on applications on 16 May, it may well have eventuated.

The Premier himself said earlier this year that while land clearing activity by land-holders remained too high the statistics were proving the effectiveness of Queensland's vegetation management laws. He also emphasised that there is only so much Queensland can do on its own to further curtail clearing and that there was an urgent need for the Commonwealth to join Queensland in a cooperative effort to lower the rates of clearing.

The proposed package is the next step in the Beattie government's progressive approach to land clearing. It is about delivering on the Premier's promise that further restrictions would not happen without financial assistance. That is what this package is all about. It is about delivering financial assistance to help land-holders adapt to the phasing out of broadscale clearing of remnant vegetation by 2006. That is, it is about doing the right thing by those land-holders who will be disadvantaged.

In fact, the proposed package puts aside \$130 million for financial assistance alone, with another \$12 million for targeted incentives for remnant vegetation management and \$8 million in similar incentives for best practice farm management plans. There will be extensive consultation with stakeholders over the proposed package and the way it will be delivered. We have already seen federal coalition ministers consulting with key rural groups such as the Queensland Farmers Federation and Agforce. I understand that Queensland will be joining in the next round of consultations in the immediate future.

The bill formalises the halt on further applications for vegetation clearing. It clarifies the situation. It is not about stopping clearing, as some people have tried to make out. It is not about stopping permits that are already in the system. It simply provides breathing space while the governments consult with stakeholders and while a major joint initiative between the state and Commonwealth is finalised. Placing this halt on clearing applications was jointly agreed by both governments—a Labor government and a coalition government. As such, it should be supported by all members of this House. I commend the bill to the House.