

Queensland Parliament Hansard Green

DATE: 04/02/2020

FILE: 04022020_000896_LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY_GREEN CHAMBER.DOCX

SUBJECT: (no subject found)

MEMBER: Mr KATTER

044

 **Mr KATTER** (Traeger—KAP) (5.39 pm), in reply: It is very disappointing that there have not been more speakers on the bill. Government members' contributions to this bill have been very disappointing. I tried to set the bar very low with the amendments we have brought to the House. It is very disappointing to hear during the course of the debate comments to the effect that we are trying to turn things back. I thought we made it very clear at the start that this bill just sought to tidy up what we inherited, respecting the views and the ideologies of the government of the day. Labor won the war in this parliament in relation to tree clearing—we acknowledge that—but let's tidy things up and make them fair.

I refer to the contribution of the member for Warrego. It was very nice to hear a critique of what should be done, but the LNP had ample opportunity to do that itself rather than criticise what I am trying to do—something affirmative to help people. We will talk about mulga, as the member suggested.

I spent some time in the electorate of Cook, in the cape. The member made a comment about looking after the natural environment. Vast amounts of country in the cape are very unnatural because there is regrowth. I think it is because people are buying these carbon credits and locking it up, so there is all of this scrub that comes up. Usually that country has big hot burns going through it or had mechanical clearing. Back in the day, before white man's settlement, the fire was much more aggressive and would clean out that scrub, but it is all thickening up there. I would not describe that country as being in good health now. I think most people would not. If you get on the ground you will see that quite clearly.

Some other points were made. They were very disappointing. I would say they were at best ignorant but at worst misleading. It was asserted that I was trying to turn back the clock to allow more high-value agriculture. Members have not read clearly the purpose of the bill. All we are asking is that grazing activities be included in those areas that are already approved for high-value agriculture. We are not advocating more high-value agriculture, which we would love to see. Member for Warrego, of course we would love to see all of this repealed, but we are accepting that the Labor Party has won that battle. We are saying: if there is high-value agriculture there and you have said that it can only have irrigated cropping on there, why not let cattle graze on the same piece of land that is already approved? What is wrong with that?

To put that more clearly, if you have a paddock of land that is approved under the old laws for high-value agriculture, you can grow a crop, make hay from that crop and toss that hay over the fence to the cattle, but you cannot let those cattle through the gate into that same paddock to eat the hay in situ. It is just ridiculous. It is an anomaly. I think anyone who thought about that for more than five minutes and applied some intellectual rigour would say that just makes sense, but this has become a political battleground. Labor has to win the votes of urban voters who just think this is all terrible. I have tried to lower the bar to just get some buy-in so we could make things far. Unfortunately, the member for Warrego just threw rocks at that. I thought we would get some buy-in from the government.

There was some commentary by government members that there are rights for appeal. There are rights for appeal, but why would you not just include it in the Vegetation Management Act? I can tell a real story of one person spending \$400,000 on an application. It is just locked up there in a department. No-one can tell me that departments do not follow the lead of the government. If the government has a certain ideological bent, the departments will acknowledge that and will perform accordingly.

If departments have an application in front of them, that means people have spent hard-earned money—\$400,000—thinking, 'Governments are good people. They will treat me fairly.' They put in an application and knock on the door after a year or two saying, 'We are paying interest on this 400 grand. It is a lot of money for me. How is my application going?' They are told, 'Sorry, can't tell you.' Then they say, 'Well, hang on. It's been three or four years now. Government is here to help. How is my application going? I'd like to know.' They do not have to tell the applicant, and they are not telling them. That is really unfair. They should be forced to give a notice and set a time limit. They could say, 'No, we're not giving it to you.' A no can be accepted, but just give them a no.

There is then a right of appeal to follow that through, but the government is denying them that. It is saying, 'They can just go to the other court. There are other avenues.' Of course there are, but why make them incur all these additional legal costs when it should just be dealt with? Why does the department not give them the courtesy of saying, 'This does not conform with the intentions of our legislation. Here are the reasons. Sorry about that.'? Why would you not give people that courtesy? Is that too much to ask? That does not pass the fairness test.

Members have made arguments that we are rolling things back. We are not. I say again: this acknowledges that Labor won the battle on this issue—the government of the day won that right—but we just want to put some fairness in place and tidy up what we have inherited. I say to the member for Warrego that that is what it is. It is not a case of, 'Let's wait for the next parliament to turn this around. That's when we'll do it.' That is what we have tried to achieve.

The issue of mulga was raised earlier. I am pleased that it was, because it should be dealt with here. We talk about drought. I heard all these politicians, including Queensland government members, say, 'We have to do more on the drought,' and we pass around the tin for gold coins and ask people to donate. Meanwhile, there is 45,000 acres of mulga sitting out there in the south-west. It is under-utilised. Government members can come up with all the reasons and make it look nice on paper—'It is easy: they just have to make an application'—but it is impractical and unusable. If they got out there and asked people they would hear that it is impractical and unusable. When you are fighting to keep the whole place together, when you are fighting for financial survival—feeding drought starved cattle, checking your water and moving cattle—you do not have time for all this paperwork and to keep on top of these things.

The regime around mulga is so tight that people will put in an application and be told, 'You knocked that over five years ago so you can't touch that. You must touch this bit now.' Say you are carrying 500 head on your station. You might have rain down the bottom paddock of your property. You have 500 head on the dry section of your property, where you are approved for mulga. You will use all of the mulga you have been approved for to try to get a certain benefit, whereas if you have had rain down the bottom of your property you might need only half that quantity of mulga. Deregulating the mulga, especially when there is pressure on it, can lead to less usage of it, because you do not need to use as much if you are using it more efficiently. But that is not accepted. Down here, where people are not on the ground, decisions are made—everybody loves a nice, tidy, tick-a-box formula—and it becomes impractical, and no-one trusts the landholder to manage these things.

One of the thoughts I had about mulga was, 'You can't start deregulating this or lowering the bar because people might just go and knock this mulga down.' The response given to me was that no-one is stupid enough to put a match through their hay shed. I thought that was a good way to sum that up. If you are managing mulga, you will need some there for next year, the year after that and the year after that. You do not just smash away all your mulga in one hit. That is what most people will have the image of. A grazier said to me, 'I have mulga that I knocked over a couple of years ago. It is 12-feet high after two years of drought.' This is a readily available, in situ product for drought-affected properties that, with the tick of a box, the government could give them access to tomorrow for the remainder of the drought. They are not going to knock it all over because they need some for next year and the year after that. We could do that.

The member for Hinchinbrook tabled a foreshadowed amendment on my behalf. We would like to move an amendment during consideration in detail, if given the opportunity. I table the explanatory notes to that amendment.

Tabled paper: Amended explanatory notes for the Vegetation Management Act (Clearing for Relevant Purposes) Amendment Bill 2018.

It is very disappointing. I tried to present a bill that met the government halfway and said, 'Look, we understand you have won the war. We do not agree with it—we hate the fact that you won that war and it has created a lot of bitterness and animosity out in the bush—but we are stuck with that now. Let's try to tidy up these laws.'

045

We need to at least give those people some certainty and some fairness around that, yet the government has thrown it back in our face. It has thrown it back in their faces as well. It has shrouded the whole thing in politics and it is very disappointing. I appeal to the government and members of the opposition that if we can get through the second reading we can then have a debate on including something to save these people in droughted areas with regard to mulga. That would be a wonderful thing for us to do.

I do not accept any of those arguments that there is any threat to the environmental integrity of any of these places. It is absolutely misleading to say that this legislation will facilitate more high-value

ag in Queensland. It just says in the definition in terms of anything that is approved under 22A that we can allow grazing on it. It does not say that it allows more high-value ag. It just says that for all of the things that have been approved—and there will probably be hardly any approved again—such as the high VA that is existing and the remaining things that have been approved that means that they are allowed grazing on that same parcel of land rather than just straight farming. It is an anomaly that needs to be fixed—simple—and I hope people would find it in themselves to support that.

On a lighter note, I make an apology to the House. Members could say that if I was being cheeky I was perhaps testing people's awareness, but in the explanatory notes of my bill I made an error in the objectives of this bill which is captured again in the committee's notes. It said 'remove grazing activities from the definition of high value ag' when in fact I intended the bill to do the opposite and the bill does the opposite. Perhaps I was just testing people in my error, but no-one seemed to pick that up. Perhaps people were being polite or kind to me, but I make that point for the record that there was an error in those explanatory notes.

I hope that people can find some compassion. I am trying not to be too emotive in this debate—and there certainly is a lot of emotion around this outside of the metropolitan areas—but we want to keep it sensible and acknowledge the fact that these are very modest compromises, a fact about which the member for Warrego was criticising me before, but that is because I am trying to reach out to find some common ground of something that is sensible. It is a pity that there was criticism labelled at that. The criticism would have been very fair from the government if it said, 'We don't agree with that sort of stuff,' and leave it at that, but do not try to portray that people are not getting knocked back by saying that hardly any applications have been rejected. People are not applying. People are talking to their friend who spent \$400,000 and he still has not got an answer in three or four years and so they say, 'Blow that. I'm not going to have a go at that because it's expensive and I know that the government's going to knock it back.' It is very misleading to say, 'We're not knocking many back,' or 'This is the rate of knock-backs and that's the truth.' It is not the truth. If you get out on the ground and talk to people you will find that that is very misleading.

I respect the government's position on these things. I do not agree with it—I bitterly disagree with it—but I respect the fact that it is the government and it holds those views, but do not try to misinterpret or manipulate those facts to provide a false sense of what the reality is. I would see that as an enormous unfairness to people in rural areas not just on the properties themselves but the towns that surround them, because we all rely on those industries in a symbiotic way. With that, I would very much urge the House to adopt these two amendments to the bill. Hopefully we will get through the second reading to address that amendment that has been circulated that would allow mulga clearing during the drought for those drought-affected areas to save those people who so desperately need it and give a free source of fodder to those people that is in situ ready to help them right now.