



Speech by

Andrew Cripps

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

Hansard Tuesday, 8 June 2010

MANAGED INVESTMENT SCHEME PLANTATION FORESTRY PROPERTIES; MORESBY AND EAST PALMERSTON STATE SCHOOLS

Mr CRIPPS (Hinchinbrook—LNP) (12.22 pm): I rise to address two issues that are of importance to my electorate of Hinchinbrook. The first is also an issue of importance to North Queensland as a region. Two weeks ago, I toured my electorate documenting the absolutely disgraceful state of disrepair of failed managed investment scheme plantation forestry properties in the Herbert River district, the Tully district and the Innisfail district.

Last week I wrote to several state and federal ministers to lodge a formal complaint about the disastrous land management practices of several MIS companies, a number of which have now gone into receivership, which have established plantation forestry properties across North Queensland. These failed MIS companies have left behind an environmental disaster on a massive scale, with pest weeds and feral animals thriving unchecked, creating huge problems for neighbouring landowners and a serious fire risk. The MIS companies have replaced thousands of hectares of good-quality farmland with plantation forestry. There is also the issue of derelict cane that they have failed to remove which risks harbouring and spreading sugarcane diseases such as smut.

I believe that DERM has been negligent in allowing these properties of MIS companies to fall into such a terrible state of disrepair. The Bligh government is being hypocritical, following 12 months of imposing several layers of regulation on North Queensland farmers for supposedly being responsible for hurting the Great Barrier Reef. But it has ignored the abject failure of these absentee landowners to meet basic land management standards. Although private landowners in North Queensland have had new regulations imposed on them over the past 12 months, DERM has done nothing in respect of these MIS companies. The Bligh government has been fully aware that these MIS companies are failing miserably to do basic maintenance.

DEEDI has agreements in place with these MIS companies to run plantation forestry trials on these properties, including at Abergowrie in my electorate. It demonstrates terrible double standards on the part of the Bligh government. Owing to the height and volume of unmanaged pest weeds on some MIS properties, local landowners have expressed serious concerns about the risk of fires in the coming dry season and the damage that they could cause to neighbouring farms. Now that these MIS companies are going broke, they are dumping the costs of managing their properties on neighbouring landowners. Given the economic cost, the environmental damage and the fire safety concerns involved and the sheer scale and size of the problem, I believe that it is fair to say that we have an emergency on our hands in North Queensland.

The second issue that I want to canvass is the advice that I received from the Minister for Education last week that Education Queensland will be conducting a review of the viability of East Palmerston State School and Moresby State School in my electorate of Hinchinbrook. In the first instance, I am extremely disappointed that less than two years after Moresby State School was last forced to endure a review of its viability—and survived—it is subjected to yet another viability review by the Bligh Labor government. If there is one thing that undermines confidence in a school and disrupts and distresses school communities,

it is the threat of a school closing. Currently, enrolments at Moresby State School are at 16. Only one student will leave the school, having completed year 7 at the end of 2010, and at least four new students will commence the prep year in 2011. A simple phone call by EQ to the school would have avoided this unjustified review and its associated disruption to the school.

At East Palmerston State School, news of the viability review has certainly upset the school community, in particular the parents of several students who have brought to me stories of the significant progress that their child with learning difficulties has made under the guidance of the teaching principal of this small school, who has been able to provide more time, individual attention and support to these children with special needs when other larger schools have been unable to provide a conducive learning environment. Parents are entitled to make choices about their child's education and that includes sending their child to a small school to take advantage of this opportunity. Some parents choose to drive past other schools to send their child to East Palmerston State School, such is the reputation that it has earned of providing a supportive learning environment for students with special needs.

Currently, East Palmerston State School has 18 students. Other schools in the district are more than 20 kilometres away—a journey that would put these students on the Palmerston and Bruce highways, Henderson Drive and the Innisfail-Japoonvale Road for almost 50 kilometres every day when it is totally unnecessary. Indeed, \$300,000 is being spent at both Moresby State School and East Palmerston State School to construct new facilities and to refurbish classrooms and other school facilities under the Commonwealth government's stimulus package. Today, I want to say to the Minister for Education that I will provide every support I can to the P&C associations of Moresby State School and East Palmerston State School to prevent these two great little schools from closing.