



Speech by

Andrew Cripps

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

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APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL AND APPROPRIATION BILL: ESTIMATES COMMITTEE F

Mr CRIPPS (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (8.29 pm): I rise to contribute to the debate on the report of Estimates Committee F. In particular, I wish to make some comments in relation to the responsibilities of the minister for the environment. Specifically, there are two issues which were referred to during the proceedings of Estimates Committee F in which I have an ongoing interest. In north Queensland there is a serious and growing feral pig problem. I threw down a challenge to the minister for the environment in February this year when I said in this place that the state government has consistently demonstrated that it is not willing to assist landowners suffering economic losses from feral pig damage and that it is abrogating its environmental responsibilities by not properly controlling feral pig numbers on state controlled land such as national parks and forests. This damage continues and it is getting worse. But to the minister's credit she duly organised a briefing with senior officers in her department and they subsequently visited north Queensland. I offered to facilitate the inspection of extensive feral pig damage to agricultural crops and national parks any day, any time in my electorate.

Following that visit there was an announcement from the state government that it would run a trial feral pig trapping program in the Wet Tropics in the area between Innisfail and Ingham for three months between August and October this year. I welcomed this announcement, and I thank the minister, but argued at the time that the trial program needed to be followed up with some real commitment in the form of a trapping program lasting not three months but three years. It was an admission that there is a serious and growing feral pig problem in the Wet Tropics and that the efforts of the state government to this point have not been adequate.

On 6 February this year I asked the minister for the environment a question on notice. I asked the minister to provide a breakdown of the EPA's expenditure on pest animal management and pest weed management for 2005-06 and what the EPA estimated it would spend on the same programs in 2006-07. The answer to the question on notice was promising insofar as it indicated that the state government had planned to increase funding from approximately \$4.5 million in 2005-06 to approximately \$5 million in 2006-07. I thought that was positive. I thought we were going in the right direction. However, the press release from the Premier and the Treasurer on 4 June this year showed that the figure would be cut in 2007-08 by half a million dollars to \$4½ million, and that comes as a disappointment.

The reality is that as pest weeds and feral animals become more prolific they pose a major threat to the survival of endangered plants and animals and cost farmers and landowners millions in lost production and control costs. When the state government is acquiring and declaring more and more areas of national park, Queenslanders should be alarmed that the government intends to spend less and less on them, particularly in relation to animal and plant pest control. The state government needs to put much more effort into controlling feral pigs on state controlled land.

The other issue I wish to canvass is the review of the Crocodile Protection Plan, which was discussed during Estimates Committee F. I first raised concerns about the increasing problems that north Queenslanders were experiencing with crocodiles in this place in November last year. At that time I called

for a review of the Crocodile Protection Plan to provide a more effective regime for dealing with crocodiles near populated areas and public facilities whereby the crocodiles would be removed immediately. The issue had been given increased salience in north Queensland as a result of numerous problems with crocodiles on The Strand near Townsville, at Cape Tribulation, in the Lakefield National Park, in Centenary Lakes, which is a suburban area of Cairns, in Mourilyan Harbour, on the foreshore at Cardwell, off the beach at Forrest Beach and in Giru. The issue of crocodiles near populated areas and public facilities is of considerable concern to the community.

I have always acknowledged that it is difficult to settle on a protection plan that conserves the population of wild crocodiles and provides adequate protection for people in Queensland, but it is clear from the large increase in instances where crocodiles and people are coming into close contact and from observations in the wild that crocodile numbers have significantly increased since they have become fully protected. I do not accept the argument that they are endangered.

As I said in November last year, it is clear that the current Crocodile Protection Plan is not an adequate tool for their management, and they have become problematic when they pop up near populated areas and public facilities. If the state government refuses to make appropriate changes to the provisions of the Crocodile Protection Plan in the face of the strong and clear message from the people of north Queensland that they want something done, this will only result in further community unrest and it will only encourage support for a cull. The minister knows that I have never advocated a cull, but if the state government does nothing to address the issue and a tragedy does occur I will find it very difficult to oppose such measures.

The recent survey conducted by the state government indicating that there has been no increase in the crocodile population does not have much credibility amongst north Queenslanders. Nearly 2,400 people have supported a petition calling for changes to the Crocodile Protection Plan to have them immediately removed from populated areas and public facilities. North Queenslanders know the truth of the situation.