



Speech by

Andrew Cripps

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

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CAPE YORK PENINSULA HERITAGE BILL

Mr CRIPPS (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (3.07 pm): I rise to make a contribution to the debate on the Cape York Peninsula Heritage Bill 2007. The stated objectives of the bill are to identify significant natural and cultural values of Cape York Peninsula, to provide for cooperative management, protection and ecologically sustainable use of land, including pastoral land, in Cape York Peninsula, to recognise the economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations of Indigenous communities on Cape York Peninsula in relation to land use, and to recognise the contribution of the pastoral industry in Cape York Peninsula to Queensland's economy and land management.

The bill applies only to Cape York Peninsula and has been developed to recognise its unique natural and cultural values. The bill proposes to allow for the return of homelands to traditional owners and provides opportunities for them to develop a sustainable economic, cultural and social future. This is a positive initiative and is in contrast with the current passive welfare system that encourages a culture of apathy, underachievement and social dysfunction in Indigenous communities.

The stated objectives of the bill are proposed to be achieved by the declaration of areas of international conservation significance, the cooperative involvement of landholders in the management of the natural and cultural values of Cape York Peninsula, the continuance of an environmentally sustainable pastoral industry as a form of land use in Cape York Peninsula, the declaration of Indigenous community use areas in which Indigenous communities may undertake appropriate economic activities, and the establishment of committees to provide advice on the implementation of the Cape York Peninsula Heritage Act. The bill broadly reflects the agreement between the mining industry, the Indigenous community, the pastoral industry and conservation groups on how best to protect the natural environment and legitimate economic opportunities in Cape York Peninsula.

The bill provides for joint management of a new category of national park, known as a national park (Cape York Peninsula Aboriginal land), with Indigenous groups being permitted to pursue some development activities. Specifically, the bill designates areas of Indigenous land that are suitable for activities such as agriculture, grazing or, indeed, aquaculture, and allows a limited amount of clearing of vegetation to be undertaken via permit following appropriate assessments.

The bill provides for a new Indigenous Rangers Program to manage Cape York's declared wild rivers areas. One of the more satisfying aspects of this bill is that it appears that a much more sensible and proactive consultation process has been undertaken before the legislation has been introduced into this place. This is in contrast to the way that consecutive wild rivers bills have been put together by this government. The original consultation process for that legislation was very rushed. The first wild rivers bill in 2005 was very poorly put together and was terribly flawed. This was confirmed when the parliament was asked to consider another wild rivers bill in November 2006 to amend the legislation before the declarations were made. Those declarations were made following the consideration of a third bill in February this year.

As I have said before in this place during debate on the latter two of those three bills, during the consultation process for the original wild rivers legislation there were considerable concerns expressed in

rural and regional communities in relation to the proposed legislation from a variety of stakeholder groups which were not given appropriate consideration by the government. The amendments that were passed in November 2006 did marginally improve the severe impact that the Wild Rivers Act 2005 had on regional and rural areas of Queensland where it increased the uncertainty and diminished the property rights of landowners in areas where they have already been undermined by this state Labor government's vegetation management legislation. This government did not listen and that was evident from the raft of amendments that the parliament was asked to consider in November 2006 before any declarations could be made.

I am therefore encouraged that the government appears to have gone out and engaged and actually listened to a range of relevant stakeholders who have cautiously endorsed this bill. This suggests that they believe that the agreement strikes the right balance between conserving the environment, respecting significant Indigenous cultural issues on Cape York Peninsula, providing economic opportunities to those local communities and encouraging established and emerging industries. It is a welcome change from the heavy-handed approach that is typical of this government and which has been so evident in recent times on a range of legislation.

The bill earmarks areas of international conservation significance and creates a mechanism for the declaration of more national parks. At this point I must raise my concerns about the lack of effort that this government is putting in to the maintenance of its national parks as far as pest weeds and feral animals are concerned. If the Cape York Peninsula Heritage Bill proposes to expand the area of state controlled land, then it is vital that the government also move to increase the resources available to control pest weeds and feral animals in these national parks.

As I have said on more than one occasion in this place, in north Queensland there is a significant serious and growing feral pig problem. I said to the former minister for the environment earlier this year that the government has consistently demonstrated that it is unwilling to take appropriate action in response to the environmental damage caused by feral animals on state controlled land and assist landowners suffering economic losses from feral pig damage. The government is abrogating its responsibilities by not properly controlling feral pig numbers on state controlled land such as national parks and state forests. The damage continues to get worse and feral pig numbers continue to increase. This is certainly true on Cape York Peninsula where I have heard reports of extensive feral pig damage in places like Lakefield National Park and Cape Melville National Park, which are well known for their very sensitive wetlands and melaleuca swamps.

I repeat my expression of disappointment in relation to the EPA's expenditure on pest animal management and pest weed management that was cut by the government's 2007-08 state budget. This will be a relevant issue if there is an expanded public estate on Cape York Peninsula. On 6 February this year I asked the former minister for the environment a question on notice 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 for 2006-07. The answer to that question on notice was promising insofar as it indicated that the government planned to increase the funding from approximately \$4.5 million in 2005-06 to approximately \$5 million in 2006-07. I was pleased that there appeared to be some acknowledgement that there needed to be more resources allocated for that purpose. I thought we were moving in the right direction. But a press release on 4 June this year from the former Premier and the then Treasurer, who is now the Premier, indicated that the figure in 2007-08 would be cut by half a million back to \$4.5 million. That was very disappointing and certainly showed that the former minister for the environment did not have a full understanding of the severity and the scope of the issue with respect to pest weeds and feral animals.

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 areas for national park or providing a mechanism for the expedited declaration of more areas, as is being done in this bill, Queenslanders should be aware and alarmed that the government has decided to spend less on their maintenance, particularly in relation to pest control. The government needs to put more effort into controlling feral pigs on state controlled land.

Over the last 12 months I have been working with local industry groups, local councils and the wider community to raise the profile of this issue in north Queensland. We have come some way since the government advised me last year that it did not think that we had a problem in my area of the world. The government has been embarrassed into doing something by a chorus of industry groups, landowners, conservation groups and local councils being critical of its lack of action with respect to this issue.

The former minister for the environment announced two projects this year: a three-month trial program between Innisfail and Ingham which has been running since August and will wind up at the end of this month; and more recently the former minister announced a two-year \$150,000 trapping program to be delivered by Terrain Natural Resource Management in the Herbert River district. I welcome these two projects as a step in the right direction. What a change in attitude this represents from the government in

less than 12 months. We have gone from a situation where there was apparently no problem to putting more resources into the specific area. I think it is quite remarkable really.

I am pleased that the Minister for Sustainability, Climate Change and Innovation is in the House at this point in time because I want to make this point very clearly to him and offer some advice about having a deeper understanding of this problem: trapping programs have focused on private freehold land adjacent to state controlled land. There has been no enhanced effort to attack the populations inside the national parks and state forests where feral pigs have found a safe haven because access to these areas is being denied to people who wish to pursue feral animals on state controlled land. I say to the minister that, if the government will not provide more rangers and resources to existing rangers in the QPWS to undertake these control efforts, the government ought to engage professional contractors.

Mr O'Brien: It does.

Mr CRIPPS: Evidently not enough. The member for Cook interjects out of his seat. Unfortunately it is not enough because feral pig numbers are increasing exponentially as we speak. Alternatively, it could hold induction courses and issue permits to the members of the public who wish to do it for free on state controlled land. Either way, the government continues to address only part of the problem at the interface of public and private land while allowing weeds and animals to flourish inside national parks and state forests.

Mr McNamara: You caught my statement about Canarvon last week—4,000 horses, 151 pigs?

Mr CRIPPS: Horses are one thing. I am talking mostly about feral pigs because it is a problem impacting significantly not only in my area but also on Cape York Peninsula, which is the subject of this bill.

Mr O'Brien: Feral pigs are not the subject of the bill.

Mr CRIPPS: Well, certainly national parks are, member for Cook, and this is a major problem for maintaining the pristine environment which you spoke—

Mr O'Brien interjected.

Mr CRIPPS: This is a major problem—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Wettenhall): Order! Please address your remarks through the chair.

Mr CRIPPS: Through you, Mr Deputy Speaker, it is a major problem for the maintenance of the pristine environment that the member for Cook spoke about so passionately. He of all people should understand the impact that these very large herds of feral pigs have on his area of the world. I note he is rolling his eyes; he may not be interested.

While I have primarily spoken about this issue with respect to my area, this bill is about Cape York and on Cape York feral pigs are of even greater concern. If there are tens of thousands of feral pigs on state controlled land in my area, there are hundreds of thousands on Cape York Peninsula doing exactly the same thing. If this bill seeks to give greater recognition and enhanced protection to the unique environment on Cape York Peninsula, the efforts of the government need to extend beyond the rhetoric.

The new opportunity being afforded to Indigenous communities to have a greater say in the management of this new category of national park will only be successful if they are properly resourced. I am labouring this point because in my experience the government has not put sufficient emphasis on maintaining state controlled land, particularly national parks. It will be particularly important on Cape York Peninsula because of the vast and remote nature of the land.

This morning just prior to the debate on the bill commencing, extensive and significant amendments were produced which I understand will be moved by the Premier later. There are 24 amendments in total. One of the amendments, amendment No. 3, relates to the gathering of crocodile eggs for commercial use by Indigenous communities. Prior to this occurring, however, a two-year study will have to be conducted to ascertain whether or not such harvesting is sustainable. It is not often that I agree with the member for Cook.

Mr O'Brien: I am sure that is not true.

Mr CRIPPS: It is not often that I agree with the member for Cook and that is evident from just a few moments ago. During the debate earlier on this bill, the member for Cook did make some sensible observations about how frustrating this provision was, given that those of us who live in north Queensland know there are no problems whatsoever about the wild estuarine crocodile population, despite the recent results of an EPA survey. I concur with the member for Cook and his remarks earlier that this amendment requiring a further bureaucratic process to be undertaken will delay Indigenous communities from pursuing a sensible commercial activity. I urge the government to rethink this provision because I believe it is an unnecessary burden to place on this activity and will only hold back the spirit of what this bill is trying to achieve.

The bill offers greater certainty to graziers by giving the opportunity to lessees to obtain 75-year rural leases if they agree to be proactive in protecting World Heritage values and enter into Indigenous land use

agreements. I think this is a positive initiative and is the part of the bill which probably reflects best the reason why a range of stakeholders have cautiously endorsed the bill in recognition that it proposes a more balanced approach between economic development, Indigenous issues and environmental protection than we can generally expect from this state Labor government. Primarily for this reason, I support the bill.