



Speech by

Andrew Cripps

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

Hansard Thursday, 17 September 2009

MOTION: FAR NORTH QUEENSLAND REGIONAL PLAN

Mr CRIPPS (Hinchinbrook—LNP) (3.44 pm): I rise to make a contribution to the debate on the motion moved by the Minister for Infrastructure and Planning which notes the regulatory provisions of the Far North Queensland Regional Plan tabled in the Legislative Assembly on 19 June 2009 and proposes to ratify the regulatory provisions of the plan under the Integrated Planning Act 1997. As outlined by the shadow minister for Infrastructure and Planning, the member for Gympie, the LNP will not be opposing this motion. However, I will be expressing a number of concerns about the FNQ 2031 plan and, of course, as the member for Gympie did, flag that the LNP intends to undertake a review of the plan on coming to government.

I have spoken in this place on a number of occasions about the concerns and frustrations of Far North Queenslanders in relation to what was previously the draft FNQ 2025 plan, now the FNQ 2031 plan. As has already been stated, on 9 May 2008 the Premier and the Deputy Premier, who was then the Minister for Infrastructure and Planning, launched the draft FNQ 2025 plan in Cairns. As I have said before, there was a great deal of staged fanfare involved at the time. I have also said since the start of this process that I am not opposed to good planning policy and I am not opposed to a regional plan. Far North Queensland is a unique area of this country and of this state and our environment needs to be managed carefully.

There were plenty of concerns raised from the beginning about the processes by which the then draft FNQ 2025 plan was put together. The Far North Queensland Regional Organisation of Councils expressed a number of concerns about how the document was drafted. The FNQROC described the way in which the draft plan was written as an on-the-run approach and that the advisory panels considering various aspects of the draft plan were rushed. From individual local government authorities affected by the draft plan there were a range of concerns expressed, including that the draft plan unduly restricted rural residential developments, failed to adequately provide for future growth of commercial and industrial areas and significantly limited land available for urban growth.

The concerns expressed about the drafting of the then FNQ 2025 plan proved to be justified, particularly in relation to the maps that were issued with the draft plan. There were quite a number of serious errors, where large urban areas of infrastructure were mapped as good-quality agricultural land. These fundamental errors understandably undermined the confidence of many stakeholders in the accuracy of the maps and the policy decisions that were made with reference to those maps. Stakeholders in the rural sector were particularly concerned by the release in early July, some months later after the original release of the draft plan, of draft policy regulations and extensive mapping by the EPA providing for vast tracts of land to be declared areas of ecological significance under a variety of categories as part of the FNQ 2025 plan. These maps were ineffective for consultation purposes. They really did lack detail as far as what was available to stakeholders at the time. Replacement maps took some time to be provided but they were later provided in August 2008.

The stakeholders involved from that sector had limited opportunity to scrutinise those maps after the rest of the draft FNQ 2025 plan was released. An extension was provided to that sector, but it is indicative

of the inadequate stakeholder and public consultation process that was undertaken by the government in the development of the plan. It lends credence to the concerns that were expressed by the FNQROC.

The areas of ecological significance mapping in the rural landscape and production areas are an ambit claim by the EPA to secure control over private land purportedly for environmental purposes. The consultation involved in the drafting of those maps was very, very limited. There is absolutely no suggestion that compensation will be provided to those landholders for the loss of rights to that land.

At the time I put several questions on notice to the Deputy Premier about those areas of ecological significance mapping. Amongst those questions I asked the minister how much private freehold land and leasehold land would be affected by the areas of ecological significance mapping. The immense scope and impact of the EPA's claim was revealed in those answers. In the Cairns Regional Council area 362 square kilometres of private land and 360 square kilometres of leasehold land will be covered by the mapping, a total of 722 square kilometres. In the Tablelands Regional Council area 2,850 square kilometres of private land and a massive 51,154 square kilometres of leasehold land will be covered by the mapping, totalling 54,007 square kilometres of land in that region. In the Cassowary Coast Regional Council the AES mapping will cover 619 square kilometres of private freehold land and 135 square kilometres of leasehold land, a total of 632 square kilometres of land in that region.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you can understand the concerns about mapping to gain control over people's private land when in that area of the world—in my electorate in particular—a great deal of land is already state controlled land, whether World Heritage, national park or state forest, and no rates are returned to local government authorities on that land. These maps will gain further control for the state over private and leasehold land. People are very concerned about that. It impacts on the viability of local government authorities.

This is a total of 3,834 square kilometres of private land and a total of 52,000 square kilometres of leasehold land in those three local government areas—including the Cassowary Coast Regional Council, which is the area in my electorate affected by the Far North Queensland Regional Plan—that will be affected by the AES mapping associated with the FNQ 2031 plan. In Far North Queensland, the areas of ecological significance mapping proposed by the FNQ 2031 plan will sit on top of the provisions of the Vegetation Management Act.

In the near future, the government, as I understand it, intends to confirm an expansion of vegetation to be protected under that act to include regrowth vegetation. In a further layer of land use regulation covering Far North Queensland, the Vegetation Management (Regrowth Clearing Moratorium) Amendment Bill implemented 50-metre buffer zones either side of all watercourses in the Wet Tropics catchment area, which roughly equates to the geographical area covered by the FNQ 2031 plan.

In summary, for Far North Queensland it will be the Vegetation Management Act mapping for both remnant and regrowth vegetation, on top of 50-metre buffer zones for vegetation either of side of a watercourse, on top of the most recent invention by the state convention—areas of ecological significance mapping—attached to the regional statutory plan. Is it any wonder that landowners are throwing their hands up in frustration under the weight of the red tape and bureaucracy imposed by the Labor government? Is it any wonder that they are facing serious questions about their ongoing viability when the regulatory burden that they carry is massive thanks to the state government?

The policies of the government are undermining the economic viability of landowners. The market value of their properties is significantly affected by the rules, regulations and restrictions of this legislation. What they purchased in good faith at the time, the land, the capacity to utilise the land for the productive purposes and the property rights associated with that land have been substantially withdrawn, curtailed and eroded and this government has done that without any compensation.

I am pleased to report in respect of some matters raised by the community and stakeholders after the release of the original draft FNQ 2025 plan that the state government did listen and has implemented some changes. Fact sheets have been issued. They outline the changes made and incorporated into the final plan, which this motion seeks to ratify. I welcome that and I acknowledge that. But the fact that the government had to have a change of heart in relation to a number of issues pertaining to the plan shows the flawed consultation process in the first instance. I would like to talk in particular about boundary title realignments as opposed to title subdivisions.

There is no way that the rural sector reference group, which was engaged by the government to assist with the development of the draft plan in respect of agriculture, would have agreed to the prohibition of boundary realignments in the original FNQ 2025 plan if it had been truly involved in the development of the draft plan. The stated objective of the original proposed prohibition of boundary realignments in the regional landscape and rural production area is to preserve good-quality agricultural land. This rationale is substantially flawed, and anyone who had a rudimentary understanding of land use patterns in rural industry in Far North Queensland would have known that in the first instance.

The present circumstances of agricultural industries in Far North Queensland are difficult for a range of reasons. In addition, many farmers are ageing without family members being willing to take over the running of the farm business. Due to relatively high residential prices in town, landowners are unable to secure enough capital to purchase a residence of comparable and appropriate size and design in town. The alternative is for retiring farmers to continue to reside in the farmhouse.

Without the capacity to continue to service a working farm, these older landowners may simply continue to live in the farm residence and abandon working the farm or farm it at less than its capacity. This is a very real scenario considering the predicament of many in a range of rural industries. The option to realign title boundaries as opposed to subdividing existing boundaries provides an opportunity for farming families in this scenario to remain in the farmhouse, realign existing titles and sell the working farm.

If the prohibition of boundary realignments, as proposed by the original draft FNQ 2025 plan, was not withdrawn, the plan could have actually seen a substantial amount of good-quality agricultural land go out of production rather than being preserved in production. Boundary realignments do not result in a proliferation of titles. They do not result in significant loss of good-quality agricultural land. I am pleased the state government saw sense and changed its mind in this regard.

The matter of subdivisions, as opposed to boundary realignments, is a different matter. Until recently, titles zoned for agriculture could not be subdivided into titles of less than 30 hectares. The FNQ 2031 plan proposes to change this to 60 hectares. The average size of titles in Far North Queensland, certainly on the coastal plain, is relatively small. The old rule of 30 hectares caught many applications made to subdivide titles in the Far North Queensland region—save perhaps for many titles on the Tablelands, where they have larger titles. Certainly, the 60-hectare rule will capture, I believe, almost all titles in Far North Queensland, particularly on the coastal plain.

In terms of how the FNQ 2031 plan will affect Far North Queenslanders in towns and suburbs of larger centres, many local communities have expressed concerns about the proposed increases in urban residential densities. In my electorate of Hinchinbrook, for example, the FNQ 2031 plan proposes that residential densities more than double in townships like Tully, Cardwell and Mission Beach, while townships like Innisfail, Mourilyan, Kurrimine Beach and South Johnstone are also proposed to double.

I put it to the House that many people come to Far North Queensland to move away from urban residential densities of that nature. The FNQ 2031 plan limits the supply of residential land within mapped defined urban zones. Densities, as a result, will ultimately be achieved by the creation of smaller lots or providing for multistorey buildings. I would argue that the majority of Far North Queenslanders do not want to see Far North Queensland's character permanently altered by the residential density targets in the FNQ 2031 plan.

The FNQ 2031 plan asserts a population increase of approximately 100,000 people in Far North Queensland by 2031, with approximately 70,000 of those people supposedly to settle in the city of Cairns. The plan suggests that two-thirds of those 70,000 will be settling in the Mount Peter master planned area, which will effectively become Cairns's southern suburbs. That is a significant number of people in a fairly short period of time, and the importance of this regional plan in that respect cannot be overstated.

Overwhelmingly, the FNQ 2031 plan is a land use plan. It focuses on the use of land primarily in respect of how Far North Queensland will be able to accept the 100,000 people forecast to move to the region by 2031 and, indeed, how it will be able to accommodate the majority of those people in a concentrated area within the Mount Peter master planned area between Gordonvale and Cairns. The plan focuses on land use and the demarcation of some areas from others for particular purposes. In doing so, it really does not offer a comparable plan for the economic development of Far North Queensland.

The FNQ 2031 plan document does discuss economic development issues in part E of the document, and I acknowledge that. However, when you read these sections of the document, what you notice is that there is a lot of talk about strategies and objectives but there is little to be found in terms of projects or commitments to change policies to facilitate the strategies and deliver on the objectives. There is a lot of bureaucratic doublespeak and not much in the way of clear direction and certainty for the local community, the business sector, local governments or those interested in investing in Far North Queensland.

When you examine section 5 in part E of the FNQ 2031 plan that discusses economic development, you come to realise that some of the stated aims of the FNQ 2031 plan are in direct conflict with other policies of the state Labor government. For example, the document includes one of its strategies for economic development as growing existing major employment and economic activities and it lists that employment and economic activity provided by sugar mills at Tully, South Johnstone, Babinda, Gordonvale, Mossman and the dairy factory at Malanda.

That is fair enough. That is a sensible strategy. Grow and support economic activity and employment that is already established. It astounds me, therefore, that on one hand the state government is in the process, as I mentioned earlier, of implementing amendments to the Vegetation Management Act that will prevent any expansion of these industries in the future, is in the process of putting through the Great Barrier Reef Protection Amendment Bill that will reduce production and productivity, which is aimed specifically at the sugar industry and the dairy industry, and is in the process of applying, as part of the implementation of this regional plan, widespread areas of ecological significance mapping that will impose another layer of regulation over land used by these two industries.

The FNQ 2031 plan actually devotes a section of its discussion to primary industries. It acknowledges the rural sector as a significant sector of the economy. It lists the industries in the region, including those I have mentioned earlier, as well as horticulture, forestry and mining. It also mentions fishing, both commercial and recreational. The document mentions that the commercial fishing catch is worth between \$15 million and \$20 million annually to the Far North Queensland economy and that recreational fishing as a popular activity amongst local residents has significant economic benefits to local businesses and tourist operations.

It really is a toss-up as to which level of government—federal or state—has been more ruthless with the commercial fishing industry in Queensland. Sooner or later, governments are going to have to understand that, if we cannot get enough affordable, good quality seafood from sustainable, regulated fisheries in Queensland, consumers in Queensland will increase their consumption of imported seafood, which although cheaper is of inferior quality and sourced out of unregulated and unsustainable fisheries in developing countries. Yet our commercial fishing sector—mentioned in the FNQ 2031 plan as an industry to be encouraged by the plan—is picked on by all levels of government.

Further, the economic development discussion contained within the FNQ 2031 plan document discusses the importance of manufacturing industries in the region. It is another sensible strategy but, unfortunately, not one supported by the actual actions of the state government. The extraordinary burden of EPA permit fees and charges on manufacturing industries such as aquaculture really do prevent and drive away investment in aquaculture in Far North Queensland. EPA permit fees and charges on other enterprises—such as the Northern Iron and Brass Foundry at Wangan in my electorate of Hinchinbrook—really do add significantly to the costs of these businesses operating and continuing to provide employment. It is a case of the government saying one thing and doing another.

A clear and consistent economic plan is essential for the region, because if Far North Queensland is going to accommodate another 100,000 people by 2031, they need to be able to be employed and make a living for themselves to support their families. Ultimately, the LNP has clearly and consistently stated that it supports the principle of a good regional plan. It is important to have a plan and it is important to have a good, clear plan and vision for the future. I was openly critical of a number of aspects of the draft FNQ 2025 plan and I raised those concerns in the House to represent my constituents and in view of the fact that all government members were involved in the Regional Planning Advisory Committee but non-government members were excluded.

The FNQ 2025 plan has since been amended by the state government to take into consideration a range of matters raised by the community and stakeholders in Far North Queensland. However, I continue to be concerned about a range of aspects of the now FNQ 2031 plan, including the areas of ecological significance mapping and the dramatically increased residential density targets in country towns and urban areas. I stand here to say that there is little desire amongst the Far North Queensland community to live in residential densities of that magnitude. As I have said previously, the LNP supports the principle of a good regional plan and will not oppose this motion to ratify the regulatory provisions associated with the FNQ 2031 plan, but it does reserve the right to implement a review when in government.