



Speech by

Andrew Cripps

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

Hansard Thursday, 8 October 2009

GREAT BARRIER REEF PROTECTION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr CRIPPS (Hinchinbrook—LNP) (4.22 pm): The stated objectives of this bill and the stated reasons for this bill as per the explanatory notes are fraudulent and fabricated. I oppose this bill because it is a dishonest bill, motivated by base politics rather than being based on sound science. It will have a severe impact on jobs in my electorate of Hinchinbrook and in North Queensland. It also perpetuates the inaccurate and slanderous views and attitudes promoted by the state Labor government about the land management practices of landowners, particularly primary producers in my electorate and throughout North Queensland.

The bill establishes a regulatory structure to supposedly reduce the impact of agricultural activities on the quality of water entering the Great Barrier Reef lagoon. The current agreement relating to efforts to achieve this goal is the Reef Water Quality Protection Plan. The key focus of many actions in the reef plan was to assist landholders in adopting best management practices through voluntary and incentive schemes. The reef plan has four years to run. This bill has been pursued prematurely for political reasons.

The disgraceful untruth being perpetuated by the state Labor government that nothing has happened and that no improvements are being made in terms of the quality of water from coastal rivers into the Great Barrier Reef lagoon is wrong. The reef plan requires there to be improvements in water quality. There have been. A recent report compiled by the Reef and Rainforest Research Centre publishing data taken from monitoring sites between Cairns and Innisfail in Far North Queensland has recorded decreases in nitrogen and phosphorous in waters from rivers in this area since 2003 and a reduction in suspended sediments since 1999. The data was taken from several monitoring areas relevant to the catchments of the Johnstone, Russell, Mulgrave and Barron rivers, directly relating to the designated Wet Tropics catchment described in this bill. So the justification for the introduction of these proposed regulations—that the voluntary approach has been unsuccessful—is inconsistent with the result of the monitoring being undertaken as part of the reef plan agreement, indicating that gains under the voluntary approach are being made. The foundation on which the state Labor government has developed its argument is fraudulent.

The explanatory notes accompanying the bill state that adopting certain farm management practices are known to reduce the amount of sediments and dissolved nutrients leaving the property. I can agree with that statement. However, I do not agree with the statement also in the explanatory notes that—

... regulation is needed to ensure that farm management practices that impact on water quality are improved. This in turn will improve water quality in the Great Barrier Reef lagoon.

This is a false statement and the government can produce no evidence to sustain that argument. The Australian government's \$200 million Reef Rescue package offers water quality grants and incentives to farmers to assist in the adoption of best management practices. I have figures from the regional NRM groups in relation to the number of applications submitted in the catchment areas covered by the bill. Given the opportunity to be genuine partners in a program that provided incentives to landowners to undertake projects to improve land management practices, landowners flooded the NRM groups with applications. There are so many applications that there is not enough money to fund them all. Funds have had to be

prioritised. Once again, that puts to bed the disgraceful untruth being perpetuated by the state Labor government that the voluntary incentive based approach is not working. It is working so well that the federal government's programs cannot accommodate all of the interest being expressed by landowners to undertake important projects on their properties.

In the sugar industry, only 64 out of 197 applications—or 32 per cent of applications—could be funded in the Wet Tropics catchment. In the Burdekin catchment, only 52 out of 102 applications—50 per cent of applications—could be funded. In the Mackay-Whitsunday catchment, only 181 out of 460 applications—or 39 per cent of applications—could be funded. Those figures repudiate the slander perpetuated by the state Labor government about cane farmers and their supposedly backward attitudes towards land management issues. Those figures show that cane farmers are progressive and embrace new techniques, technology and methods when given opportunity to do so.

In the cattle grazing industry, only 14 out of 54 applications—or 26 per cent of applications—in the Wet Tropics catchment could be funded. In the Burdekin catchment, 13 out of 16 applications were funded, representing 81 per cent of applications. In the Mackay-Whitsunday catchment, 98 out of 110—or 89 per cent of applications—were funded. Once again, those figures demonstrate the willingness of pastoralists to be involved in initiatives to improve land management practices when given the chance.

The horticulture industry has not been targeted by this bill, but everyone knows that it is just a matter of time. The horticulture industry is in the government's sights. In the horticulture industry, only 22 out of 57 applications—or 38 per cent of applications—could be funded in the Wet Tropics catchment. In the Burdekin catchment, only 21 out of 45 applications—or 46 per cent of applications—could be funded. In the Mackay-Whitsunday catchment, only six out of 15 applications could be funded, representing only 40 per cent of applications.

The federal government's Reef Rescue package has been a success in terms of forging a real and genuine partnership with the rural sector. I think it will be successful in securing improved outcomes in land management practices. The LNP confirmed before the last state election that it supports the federal government's voluntary incentive based approach and gave a commitment to reallocate funds committed by the Bligh government to more regulation to support innovative, industry led programs that will provide enhanced outcomes by working with farmers and not against them.

The LNP believes that more can be achieved for the long-term health of the Great Barrier Reef by Queensland pooling its resources with the Commonwealth, as opposed to creating greater bureaucratic regulation. Unlike the Bligh government, the LNP believes that, when it comes to creating and implementing a reef management plan, governments must work with stakeholders in partnership to improve the health of the reef, not target one group and penalise them for political purposes.

The LNP recognises that farmers have already made significant improvements to farming practices that have been good for the environment. With additional government support, these improvements would have continued to push best practice benchmarks even higher. Regulation should always be a last resort. Overregulation does not encourage innovative solutions or improved production technologies. It reduces efforts to improve farm practices to a lowest common denominator level. This bill is not about securing the future of the reef; it is about paying back a political debt to the Greens in return for their preferences at the last state election.

The foundations of the Bligh government are built on support from the Greens, the WWF and the Wilderness Society. This bill has been drafted to satisfy them and their demands. Labor is in their pockets. The impact on primary producers and communities in regional Queensland in terms of lost production, lost income and lost jobs has been disregarded. Labor considers rural Queenslanders to be collateral damage in its efforts to secure political power.

Many Labor MPs based in North Queensland, which this bill targets, should be aware that their support for this bill will have a serious impact on their communities in their electorates. Modelling undertaken by the Australian Sugar Milling Council has estimated the economic costs of just one part of this legislation on the sugar industry in North Queensland by catchment area relating to the imposition of a 20-metre no-spray setback from watercourses in the catchments nominated by this legislation—namely, the Wet Tropics, the Burdekin and the Mackay-Whitsunday catchments.

In the Wet Tropics catchment this provision could affect between 10 per cent and 15 per cent of the 133,000 hectares. That is between 13,300 and 20,000 hectares capable of growing between 1,130,000 and 1,700,000 tonnes of cane, the sugar from which would be valued at between \$68 million and \$102 million. In the Burdekin catchment, this provision could affect between six per cent and eight per cent of the 63,000 hectares. That is between 3,780 hectares and 5,000 hectares capable of growing between 475,000 and 625,000 tonnes of cane, the sugar from which would be valued between \$32 million and \$42 million. In the Mackay-Whitsunday catchment this provision could affect between 10 per cent and 12 per cent of the 111,500 hectares. That is between 11,150 and 13,380 hectares capable of growing

between 892,000 and 1,070,000 tonnes of cane, the sugar from which would be valued between \$58.5 million and \$70 million.

I cannot help but be alarmed to know that up to \$100 million could be lost out of the economy of the Wet Tropics catchment that covers my electorate of Hinchinbrook. It will be devastating for an industry that has struggled to survive sugarcane smut, floods, cyclones and depressed prices for the last decade. These new restrictions and regulations will be a terrible burden for them to have to carry.

If this provision for a 20-metre no-spray setback from watercourses is implemented, the loss of the land under production and the loss of the cane that would have been grown not only means the loss of sugar produced and income for the cane grower but also it means a shortened cane-harvesting season for harvester owners and operators, haul-out operators and mill workers. A shorter harvesting and crushing season for these contractors and wage earners means less income for working families in the electorate that I represent.

I warn the horticultural industry that it is next, although I think it already knows that the bullet is coming. I also warn those primary producers in the Fitzroy and the Burnett catchment that the next time the Bligh Labor government has to buy off the Greens it will turn the screws in this bill and they will be caught in the net. This bill is a disgrace. Because of the disgraceful guillotine motion that was moved this morning by the government, I will confine my remarks to those that I have already offered and give my colleagues from other areas of the state an opportunity to contribute to this debate. I strongly oppose the bill.

Ms Jones: Your shadow said that he might support it but you oppose it.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! Minister.

Ms Jones: I am trying to get their position.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! Minister.