



Speech by

Andrew Cripps

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

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WATER AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr CRIPPS (Hinchinbrook—LNP) (12.56 pm): I rise to contribute to the debate on the Water and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. The bill is an omnibus bill that proposes to amend a large number of separate and distinct acts, many of which are unrelated to each other. Many of the separate and distinct amendments deal with very important issues for different areas of the state of Queensland, and I endorse the contribution of the member for Callide to this debate on those many diverse issues. Amongst the proposed amendments in this bill are amendments to the Wild Rivers Act to create a new category of wild river declaration that seeks to provide for the extension of a wild river declaration over the Lake Eyre Basin river system. I intend to confine my contribution to the debate on this bill to the proposed amendments to the Wild Rivers Act.

My interest in the Wild Rivers Act goes right back to the very first round of declarations of wild river areas in February 2007, which included the declaration of Hinchinbrook Island, in my electorate of Hinchinbrook, as a wild river area. Hinchinbrook Island was declared a wild river area under the provisions of the Wild Rivers Act established in 2005. In the 2005 act, the definition of a wild river was intended to apply to river systems that could be reasonably well defined. Existing wild river declared areas are made up of high-preservation areas, being areas within and immediately adjacent to the river, its major tributaries and any identified special features, such as wetlands and preservation areas, being the balance of the declared area outside the high-preservation area.

Such a definition cannot be readily applied to the intended wild river declaration of the Channel Country in Western Queensland within the Lake Eyre Basin, which includes the Georgina River Basin, the Diamantina River Basin and the Cooper Creek Basin. The definition of those watercourses as proposed wild river areas will relate much more to the expansive flood plains that are strongly connected to those river systems. Therefore, it will be much more difficult to develop a physical description of a wild river area in the Channel Country for the Lake Eyre Basin declaration. As a result, a new definition of a wild river is required and the amendment in this bill will facilitate the declaration of the Channel Country as a wild river area.

Therefore, it is clear that the Wild Rivers Act will be amended from time to time at the whim of the Bligh government to satisfy whatever political prerogative it has at the time. That is precisely what this amendment bill and the Channel Country declaration within the Lake Eyre Basin are designed to achieve: a political prerogative of the Bligh Labor government. The promise to declare this area as a wild river was made to satisfy the Greens in the lead-up to the 2009 state election. Since it was first established in 2005, the Wild Rivers Act has always been a political tool of the Queensland Labor Party. For example, take the ridiculous declaration of Hinchinbrook Island, in my electorate, as one of the original wild river areas in February 2007.

Mr CRIPPS (Hinchinbrook—LNP) (2.36 pm): Hinchinbrook Island sits just off the coast of my electorate, with its northern most point adjacent to the town of Cardwell and its southern most point adjacent to the town of Lucinda. Hinchinbrook Island is 39.3 square kilometres in size and, as such, is Australia's largest island national park. The island has been separated from the mainland by the deep, narrow, mangrove fringed Hinchinbrook Channel for about 100,000 years and has remained in relatively

uninhabited, pristine condition. It is this unique pristine environment that has resulted in state and federal governments choosing to make a range of conservation declarations on and around the island to preserve its natural values.

The environmental value of Hinchinbrook Island was quite rightly recognised early, and the island itself was declared a national park in 1932. I wholeheartedly support the ongoing preservation and conservation of Hinchinbrook Island. This has been substantially achieved by the early declaration of the island as a national park. In addition, Hinchinbrook Island is surrounded by World Heritage declared areas—on one side by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and on the other by the Wet Tropics. How much more protected can you get than a national park surrounded by World Heritage?

So why was Hinchinbrook Island in my electorate declared in the first round of wild river declarations in February 2007, when its declaration is obviously so completely superfluous to the ongoing preservation of the conservation values of the island? The answer is politics—pure, cynical and blatant politics designed to benefit the Queensland Labor Party at the ballot box. The Queensland Labor Party needed to deliver agreed numbers of wild river declarations, now numbering 10, mostly in North Queensland and including Hinchinbrook Island, to secure the preferences of the Greens at both the 2006 and 2009 state elections, which has helped it cling to power.

It has been part of the same grubby political agreements that have led to a whole raft of vindictive, onerous and oppressive regulations being imposed on North Queensland in recent years by the Bligh Labor government, supposedly to protect the environment but, in truth, to protect the majority of the Queensland Labor Party in this parliament. At the most recent state election, the centrepiece of this grubby political deal was the so-called Great Barrier Reef Protection Amendment Bill—a blatant, dishonest and shameless attack on farmers and graziers in North Queensland. The rationale behind that legislation is fraudulent and fabricated. It has put North Queensland farmers and graziers in the same regulatory class as sewage treatment plants and heavy metal refineries and has demanded compliance with this complicated new red tape under threat of massive fines and even jail terms.

The pay-off was the locking in of Greens preferences behind the Bligh government at the last state election—another horrific example of the Bligh government playing politics with the livelihoods of Queenslanders. So imagine my disbelief when I read media reports recently of Premier Bligh accusing the Leader of the Opposition and the leader of the Liberal-National coalition in the federal parliament, Tony Abbott, of playing politics by introducing his private member's bill to overturn Labor's Wild Rivers Act in Queensland. Surely this is the most shocking example of the pot calling the kettle black, even by the Bligh government's standards. Surely the hypocrisy of this government has reached a new level. The political nature of the Wild Rivers Act goes right down to the fundamentals of the policy, and it has affected my electorate.

One of the programs attached to the wild river declarations is the Wild River Rangers Program. The Wild River Rangers Program itself is a good program. It provides some opportunities to local traditional owners to be engaged in efforts to preserve the environmental and cultural values of the landscape within the wild river areas. The Wild River Rangers Program was provided for after the passage of the Cape York Peninsula Heritage Bill that passed through this parliament in October 2007. As I mentioned previously, Hinchinbrook Island was declared a wild river area in February 2007, along with Fraser Island, Gregory River, Morning Inlet, Settlement Creek and Staaten River—eight months before the Wild River Rangers Program was established. These six wild river areas, declared together in February 2007, all presumably met the same criteria to attract such a declaration, exhibiting the same conservation values and supposedly needing protection under the Wild Rivers Act. It follows, therefore, that they should all be treated equally in terms of their ongoing management.

In June 2008, the Bligh government delivered wild river rangers to the wild river areas on Cape York Peninsula and the Gulf of Carpentaria that it had declared in February 2007 and after the Wild River Rangers Program had been established after the Cape York Peninsula Heritage Bill passed through the parliament in October 2007. I have no quarrel with that. However, the Bligh government did not simultaneously deliver the Wild River Rangers Program to the Hinchinbrook Island wild river area, despite it being declared at the same time as those wild river areas on Cape York Peninsula and in the Gulf of Carpentaria. I certainly have a quarrel with this neglect by the Bligh government.

In fact, I had written to the then minister for natural resources and water, who is the current Minister for Main Roads, in April 2008 asking for the Wild River Rangers Program to be delivered to the Hinchinbrook Island wild river area, given that the program had been established in October 2007. When the minister replied to my correspondence he came up with the rather lame excuse that the Wild River Rangers Program on the cape and in the gulf was a trial and that, if the trial went well, Hinchinbrook Island might get some wild river rangers later. Why was the Hinchinbrook Island wild river area denied access to the Wild River Rangers Program when it was declared at the same time, met the same criteria and had the same conservation values that supposedly needed protection? The answer, once again, is politics. Hinchinbrook Island was being treated as a second-class wild river area by not having the Wild River

Rangers Program delivered in it—while that program was delivered in the other wild river areas on the cape and in the gulf that had been declared at exactly the same time.

Mr Robertson: Have you written to me about this?

Mr CRIPPS: I had written to the previous minister for natural resources and water. I will get to that.

Mr Robertson: What I am doing is inviting you to write to me about it.

Mr CRIPPS: Sure. Not only did the Bligh government fail to deliver the Wild River Rangers Program in the Hinchinbrook Island wild river area at the same time as all the other wild river areas that were declared in February 2007; it failed to deliver the program before it went ahead and declared three more wild river areas in April 2009, being the Stewart River, the Archer River and the Lockhart River wild river areas. So much for these declared wild river areas being pristine environments desperately requiring immediate protection. Not until July 2009, more than 2½ years after being declared a wild river area and almost two years since the Wild River Rangers Program had been established, did the Hinchinbrook Island wild river area have wild river rangers allocated to it. It was totally unfair for the Wild River Rangers Program to be rolled out in certain areas of Queensland and not others.

I wonder whether the Bligh government would have delivered the Wild River Rangers Program to Hinchinbrook Island at all had I not written to the former minister for natural resources and water for a second time in June 2008 and spoke in the parliament about it in August 2008 and again in June 2009. How do I know that? Fraser Island was declared a wild river area at the same time as Hinchinbrook Island, in February 2007. Three years and nine months after that declaration and three years and one month after the Wild River Rangers Program was established, I am not aware of a single wild river ranger being allocated to Fraser Island despite the fact that it was amongst the first to be declared.

So we really have two classes of wild river declared areas in Queensland—one where the Bligh government thinks it can get a local political advantage by delivering the Wild River Rangers Program ahead of others that have been similarly declared and another where the Bligh government has just made a declaration for political purposes to make up the numbers to satisfy the demands of the Greens in exchange for preferences at election time. I wonder which category the proposed declaration of the Channel Country in Western Queensland, as part of the Lake Eyre Basin, as a declared wild river area, will fall into? Will the Channel Country get wild river rangers soon after it is declared, or will it wait for years as Hinchinbrook Island did and as Fraser Island still is?

The whole Wild Rivers Act is a cynical, political farce and it is a real shame that a worthwhile program like the Wild River Rangers Program is associated with it. The rangers themselves undertake valuable conservation work and strengthen cultural connections between themselves as traditional owners and the declared areas in which they work. The program has been successful within the Hinchinbrook Island wild river area, where the wild river rangers have been belatedly deployed under the auspices of the Giringun Aboriginal Corporation, a well-established, reputable, practical and progressive organisation representing traditional owners in my electorate. It is a real shame that this program was not established independent of the politically tarnished Wild Rivers Act. I reiterate my support for the contribution to the debate by the member for Callide in relation to the proposed amendments to the Wild Rivers Act and the diverse range of other acts that are proposed to be amended by the various provisions in this bill.