

RURAL COMMUNITIES IMPACTS BILL

Second Reading

Mr ANDREW STONER (Oxley—Leader of The Nationals) [10.00 a.m.]: I move:
That this bill be now read a second time.

It gives me great pleasure to introduce this important bill. It continues the great tradition of The Nationals of placing the needs of country and coastal people foremost in the minds of legislators. In 1996 the Premier promised that any major changes proposed by government departments in rural New South Wales would be subject to a rural communities impact statement. At the time the Premier said:

I want to make sure that the potential economic impact of any changes is fully understood before State Cabinet makes a decision.

Clearly, that promise has fallen by the wayside. An instance of that is found in a recent document from the Department of Primary Industries called "A Proposed Work Force Management Plan". The document has several pages dealing with the carve-up of agriculture, fisheries and forestry in New South Wales, the proposed sale of a number of agricultural research stations and the loss of literally hundreds of jobs in the new Department of Primary Industries. As for the impact on rural communities, on page 3 it states:

Economic and employment effects

As Orange has been announced as the head office of the Department of Primary Industries with the majority of corporate services staff located there, and Mineral Resources staff moving from Sydney to Maitland, both of these rural areas should benefit from increased employment.

If that is supposed to be a rural communities impact statement, it is an absolute joke. It does not mention the devastating effect of these proposed changes on towns such as Grafton, Temora, Trangie and Deniliquin, and on the agricultural research station at Narara on the Central Coast. I will come back to the impact of these changes. I merely highlight what the Premier's grand plan has come to in terms of rural communities impact statements. It is pathetic. The depth of fury in regional New South Wales at the earliest decisions of the Labor Government forced the Premier to promise in August 1996 that, to use his words, "any major changes proposed by government departments in rural New South Wales will be subject to a rural communities impact statement".

Here we have an opportunity for the Labor Party and, in particular, the so-called Country Labor faction to support legislation which ensures that rural communities impact statements are not only done properly but are also available to the public and to the communities that would be affected by any proposed changes. That would hold true for a Coalition government as well as the Labor Government. This legislation is essential in terms of ensuring probity and transparency, and that the needs of rural and regional communities are taken into account by all governments. The bill codifies obligations that must be included in the government decision-making process. It will mean that the most Sydney-centric Labor Government in our history will no longer be left to brush aside the needs of country people.

The bill will ensure that the Government is fully aware of the impact of its decisions on some of our most vulnerable communities and country people before decisions are made. It will require that a rural communities impact statement be prepared for any bill, regulation or environmental planning instrument that can affect rural communities. Part 1 of the bill defines "rural community" as the part of the State outside Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong. As I travel around country New South Wales, I hear people continually say that according to this Government NSW stands for Newcastle, Sydney and Wollongong. So it is appropriate that there be legislation that protects the interests of communities outside those metropolitan areas. This simple definition allows for the rural community to be considered either the whole of the State outside Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong or any parts of that whole that are the subject of proposed government policies and laws.

Part 2 lists the factors that must be considered in each impact statement, including impacts on businesses, employment and services. It also expects that a model be developed to consider the long-term impacts of any proposed law so that, for example, restrictions on development opportunities that may have minimal immediate impact are also considered for their effect as populations shift or technologies advance. Part 2 demands that any law that affects the natural environment be scrutinised for the way that it also affects the economic and social wellbeing of rural communities. That is the triple bottom line that people often talk about—social, economic and environmental. This will ensure that the needs of the environment and the people who live in it will be considered equally.

Conservation laws that destroy the equity of landholders and slash job opportunities and deliver dubious environmental outcomes have been a hallmark of the Carr Labor Government. Part 2 also contains a provision for a rural communities impact statement to conclude that a proposed law will have "no likely impact". This provision allows for quick consideration of laws that are not likely to affect rural communities. Part 3 requires Ministers and Government members who wish to introduce bills into the Parliament to ensure that a rural communities impact statement has been prepared and considered by Cabinet. The current 21-member Labor Cabinet, which boasts only three so-called Country Labor members, could certainly use, and take heed of, specialist advice about the impact of its decisions on country communities before those decisions are made.

Part 3 also contains the critical provisions of clause 10, which ensure that the details of the impact statement that were put to Cabinet are tabled in the Parliament before the second reading speech for a bill commences. Country people deserve a guarantee that the Government has taken their interests into account before making key decisions. By implication, the disclosure rules in this bill will reveal any occasions when Cabinet disregards the advice that it receives and, in so doing, decides to threaten further our most vulnerable rural communities. This disclosure should not trouble a responsible Government because the tabling of the details would act to strengthen the case for the legislation whenever it shows due regard to the impact statement.

Part 4 requires similar treatment of statutory rules. Under this part, the relevant Minister must first consider the findings of a rural communities impact statement before making a statutory rule. Clauses 13, 14 and 15 demand that the impact

statements are published or available to the public at the same time that the proposed statutory rules are released either for public exhibition or via the *Government Gazette*, whichever is appropriate for the rule involved under the existing provisions of either the Subordinate Legislation Act 1989 or section 40 of the Interpretation Act 1987. Part 5 ensures the bill applies specifically to environmental planning instruments and will go a long way to preventing nasty surprises like the now infamous State environmental planning policy 46 that banned many routine land management practices overnight.

Clauses 16, 17 and 18 require that the relevant Minister receive and consider an impact statement before making a State environmental planning policy, a regional environmental plan or a local environmental plan. The clauses also oblige the Minister to make the impact statement available to the public at the same time and in the same way that the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979 requires exhibition of the planning instrument itself. Part 6 deals with Cabinet policy decisions. The Premier is obliged under this part to ensure that any proposed government policy that would result in the introduction of or increase in taxes, charges and fees should first be the subject of an impact statement before being considered by Cabinet. Cabinet is then obliged to consider the statement. I would imagine the honourable member for Tweed would support that clause following the introduction of the new property taxes in the last State budget, which has seen property investors flee the Tweed and head north to Queensland. New South Wales is now the only State where property investors are taxed when they buy, taxed for every year they own—with the removal of the land tax threshold—and taxed with the new exit tax when they sell.

Part 7 of this bill stipulates that the Cabinet Office establish a specialist Rural Communities Impact Assessment Unit to co-ordinate all rural community impact statements. This unit will have power to second specialists from any government department as required. By being named in this bill, the work of the unit becomes an integral component of government that cannot be brushed aside or used selectively like the current, and usually non-existent rural impact statements, such as has happened with savage cuts to the Department of Primary Industries. Under part 8, the Premier is afforded the right to waive the demands of this bill in cases of emergency such as when the safety of people or property is under threat and the Government is forced to act swiftly. Despite this necessary flexibility, clause 24 (3) still requires that an impact statement be prepared and tabled or published retrospectively. This will allow for later refinement of emergency laws if any unintended consequences are identified in the impact statement.

In March the Ignatius Centre for Social Policy and Research released its report on the distribution of social disadvantage in Victoria and New South Wales. The report, authored by Professor Tony Vinson, is a comprehensive and independent study examining trends in early school leaving, disability and sickness support, mortality, unemployment, child abuse, birth weights, court convictions and household income. Professor Vinson devised a "disadvantage factor" to model each of these trends and reported his findings for each postcode in the State. Of the 40 most disadvantaged postcodes, 31 are in rural areas. While only 30 per cent of the State's population lives in country areas, 78 per cent of our most disadvantaged areas are country locations. Alarming, 9 per cent, or 175,000 people, are living in extreme disadvantage. This compares to 2.5 per cent in urban areas.

I imagine that I would have massive support from the left wing of the Australian Labor Party, which always supports the disadvantaged, as we know, and Country Labor, for this bill. Clearly this State has an uneven and great divide in relation to social advantage and disadvantage, which is what the bill addresses. The bill is designed to ensure that these characteristics are not exacerbated by government policy, as is the case now. Country people are four times more likely than city people to be living in a disadvantaged community. I must say that these findings steered my resolve to pursue this bill. Such statistics place grave responsibility on governments to be especially careful in their dealings with country communities. Unfortunately, this Labor Government has contributed to the disadvantage revealed by Professor Vinson.

Labor's actions rarely have regard for their impact on rural communities: they are more often than not actions that would have benefited from substantial advice of their impact before they were made. How many vain attempts has this Government had at native vegetation and water management laws? Community outrage at each attempt has eventually forced another. Even now, the substance of the new land clearing laws remains the subject of regulations that are yet to see the light of day. We were critical of this secretive approach at the time that the laws came to Parliament last year because they left so much to the Minister's discretion. We might have been more confident to accept this wait-and-see approach had the regulations been the subject of a specialised impact statement. All that we can expect at present is another experiment at the expense of our farmers and their communities.

It is worth noting that the only recent progress on water reform has come after the intervention of my Federal colleague the Deputy Prime Minister, John Anderson. The Minister for Natural Resources regularly expresses his gratitude to John Anderson for getting the New South Wales Government out of trouble in relation to water and for the principles of sustainable water management for this State and the nation. In 1995 the Labor Government introduced the Threatened Species Conservation Act. The Act requires landowners to jump through hoops and transforms bushfire hazard reduction into a bureaucratic process for landowners. It also gives unfettered power to a group of scientists and bureaucrats to constrain farming and development by listing any species as vulnerable without first considering the wider consequences of such a listing.

The Nationals and farmers support preserving our threatened species. Farmers are willing to work with the Government to put wildlife corridors in place and to rehabilitate water courses and wetlands. We all love the Australian bush and our plant and animal life, and farmers want to work with the Government. But the Government must not introduce draconian legislation without any consideration of its impacts on farmers, as happened with the threatened species legislation. Many communities are threatened, yet we have no legislation to protect them, but we do have legislation that protects threatened species. If this bill gets support in the other place, it will go a long way to protect some of those threatened communities.

Labor has ignored the democratic rights of country and coastal communities with its forced local government amalgamation agenda. Councils such as Murrurundi, Hume and Barraba have been wiped out by a stroke of Labor's pen. Preconceived outcomes were delivered by regional reviews of Peel, Clarence, the Australian Capital Territory,

Macquarie and Hume to justify their amalgamation. Most of the studies have been discredited, all lacked widespread community support and none considered the place of local government as an employer in small towns. Now the plan is unravelling. The new Yass Valley local government area, for example, was to be hit with rate increases of 19 per cent despite the claims of operational savings of \$183,000 a year that were used by Labor to justify the forced amalgamation of local councils.

Only a determined and vocal campaign by The Nationals and local ratepayers stopped Labor in its tracks. North Coast communities also lose out from Labor's forced amalgamations. The newly created Clarence Valley mega-council is so large that its subsidy has been cut under the vital Country Towns Water Supply and Sewerage Program. As a result, the Coffs Harbour/Clarence regional water supply at Shannon Creek will cost ratepayers an estimated additional \$10 million. I can think of few better examples of the need for co-ordinated and transparent impact studies in advance of government decisions.

The Premier failed to provide a guarantee that ratepayers of shires that are proposed for amalgamation would have their council services retained, just as he failed to rule out ongoing rate increases. Yet, despite communities being left worse off by the changes, the Government pushes forward. The huge impact of the new property tax regime that is rolling through the bush is yet to take full effect. In the Tweed electorate, 4,885 property owners will be hit with a 2.25 per cent tax if they sell their properties. The Government knew that a slump in the property market was coming in the March quarter yet still introduced this tax that will add to the losses investors will now suffer. These taxes also impact on the costs to tenants, whose rents will rise as property owners are forced to recover some of the costs imposed by the land tax and the stamp duty in this State. This Labor Government does not speak up for the people on lower incomes or who rent. These costs will flow through to the people who are typically some of the most vulnerable members of our rural community—7,648 in Tweed, 6,255 in the Tamworth electorate and 5,323 in Murray-Darling. Honourable members should stick up for their constituents.

For regional businesses, the removal of the threshold on land tax, so that all non-residential property is now subject to the annual charge, means more taxes on small regional businesses such as mechanics, doctors' surgeries and corner stores. They are already doing it very tough as a result of the worst drought in more than 100 years. When their custom and trade is down, along comes the Premier and the Treasurer, who say, "If you own any property we will slug you again." It is a kick in the guts for country people and country small business. That is why we need impact statements into the effects on rural communities.

The May business index report of business analyst Sensis Pty Ltd found that small businesses in New South Wales had already reacted to the April mini-budget. It found that only 8 per cent of small businesses thought the State Government was supportive of them, a decline of 18 percentage points since February. Against this, all other States experienced a rise in business confidence, with Queensland performing best. The honourable member for Tweed really ought to do better. The New South Wales Government's decision has put Queensland in a stronger position to poach New South Wales businesses.

Our Premier has been gazumped by his Queensland counterpart on a number of occasions. In July a project earmarked for the Hunter Valley, Boulder Steel's specialty steel plant, was lost to Queensland. Despite the hard work of Muswellbrook Shire Council to secure a stainless steel plant at the Liddell-Bayswater industrial zone between Singleton and Muswellbrook, it simply could not compete with the level of support the Ipswich City Council received from the Queensland Government. The loss of this project follows the loss of similar projects to Queensland, such as the Lithgow aluminium and silicon smelters and the headquarters of Virgin Blue. The Sensis report concluded:

The level of taxation in NSW was seen to be too high ... and there was a ... belief that there were too many taxes.

Those are not my words, but the comments of New South Wales small business. Maybe if the Labor decision makers who imposed these taxes had been informed of the impact, the Government might have found other ways to recoup money from the State taxpayers to recover its losses. Before the Government spins out its line about the Grants Commission as its defence for these taxes, I remind the House again that the Grants Commission rules were set by the State Premiers—all Labor men—including this Premier. I also remind the House that over the next few years the Government will get \$1.1 billion over and above the old Grants Commission grants to New South Wales by way of the GST. It is rolling in dough. All of this is just a furphy and a red herring designed to cover up the Government's pathetic financial management and incompetence in running the State's budget.

Rural business conditions are disastrous. The Government rates up there alongside the drought as the cause. A recent Rabobank survey of confidence in the rural sector showed that 64 per cent of farmers said that their gross income in the first quarter of 2004 was either worse or no better than for the corresponding quarter last year. Both quarters were affected by the same drought conditions and commodity prices. Of the 622 New South Wales farmers surveyed, 79 per cent also expected to pay more for farm inputs. Yet, in these times, the Government is about to close several rail branch lines, as revealed by a 21 April memorandum to all southern managers of the Rail Infrastructure Corporation. The farcical nature of the consultations designed to cause the closure of these lines is now revealed, as each of the industry participants in the Grain Industry Advisory Committee has progressively walked away from closure plans. This issue would make a perfect subject for a rural communities impact study.

Also at this time, the very department that supports farmers has been singled out for amalgamation with others. Worse still, it must give back nearly 20 per cent of its budget as the largest contribution by any government agency to paying for the Government's waste and mismanagement—\$37 million this financial year out of the new Department of Primary Industries, rising to \$58 million next year. That is appalling. This Government will go down in history as the most city-centric government ever. It will go down as a government that presided over the death of agriculture in New South Wales. Murrumbidgee college has been closed. Shannon Vale research station has been sold. Pearce's Creek research station is on the market and the Trangie station will be soon. Old Macdonald is selling the farm and plans to close down Grafton, Temora, Deniliquin and Narara agricultural research stations.

Mr Peter Black: That is not right.

Mr ANDREW STONER: You put in a moratorium just until after the Federal election, because you know that the Labor Government in New South Wales is on the nose so much that Mr Latham's chances are going down the gurgler with each passing day. So the Government imposes a quasi moratorium, a Clayton's moratorium, so these can be flogged off after the Federal election. Just two days ago hundreds of affected Department of Primary Industries staff rallied outside Parliament House warning of the savage impacts these cuts will have on country towns and on the future of agriculture, fisheries and forestry in this State.

In the case of Grafton, there was a rally at which the honourable member for Clarence spoke, along with people from those affected agencies, along with the Australian Workers Union and cleaners from schools. Labor is losing support in its heartland. They were decrying the impact on Grafton of the proposal—42 direct jobs gone, and with the multiplier effect, using government figures, a total of 192 extra jobs are going. That is 232 jobs out of the Clarence economy, or 4 per cent of the total workforce. If 4 per cent of the total workforce of Sydney were being slashed, it would be 52,000 jobs. What a great hue and cry we would have if that were to occur. But here the city-centric Labor Government says it is okay to hack into 4 per cent of the workforce in Grafton.

What will that mean apart from all those jobs going? Extrapolating the figures, it will mean 532 fewer children at Grafton schools, which will then mean 20 fewer teachers. It will mean a downgrade to the hospital. It will mean fewer police. This savage cut to just that one local economy will affect all services, and I have already talked about Deniliquin, Temora and Trangie. This Government is treating country people like second-class citizens and is making a mockery of the Premier's promise in 1996 to consider the impact on rural communities. In relation to Grafton, 50 railway jobs will be lost, 15 Department of Environment and Conservation jobs will be lost, as well as cutbacks to District Court services, and the list goes on. That is just one locality. I daresay any country member, including the so-called Country Labor faction, could talk of similar cutbacks to services and jobs in their regions.

Again, competent analysis of the impact of these cuts to the regional communities that they have purportedly served for years might have seen a different outcome. It would certainly have seen the disclosure to this Parliament of the full impact of these decisions. The sale of the State's softwood forests is on the agenda. The *Sydney Morning Herald* of 1 June revealed that the objectives of the review of State Forests—the precursor to their sale—looked only at the way that profits will be used and the value optimised. No thought is being given to long-term impacts on regional communities—positive or negative.

Ms Katrina Hodgkinson: They don't want it.

Mr ANDREW STONER: As the honourable member for Burrinjuck says, "They don't want it." Recently we were in Oberon, where the community is very strongly opposed to Labor's plans to sell off plantations or to corporatise them.

Pursuant to sessional orders business interrupted.

Debate resumed from 2 September.

Mr ANDREW STONER (Oxley—Leader of The Nationals) [10.03 a.m.]: Prior to the debate being adjourned I was speaking of the impact of various government decisions, policies and legislation upon rural communities throughout New South Wales. I touched on decisions in the timber industry. Recently 15 new national parks have been created on the North Coast, which will result in a diminution of the quantity of timber available to local mills. This in turn will impact on jobs not just in the primary industry of timber getting and timber milling but also in associated industries, such as transport. It will also impact on the retail sector as the money flows to the smaller communities, such as my hometown of Wauchope, which is still known as a timber town even though it no longer has a timber mill as a result of government policy. Any government, regardless of its political persuasion, should take into account the social, economic and environmental impacts of its key policies and legislation.

Previously I referred to the estimated impact of the closure of the Grafton Agricultural Research and Advisory Station. The initial and related downstream job cuts will affect up to 4 per cent of the work force, which is a huge impact. If that were to happen in Sydney, it would equate to 50,000 jobs—people would not turn a blind eye. But it seems that in the pursuit of economic rationalism and centralisation the Government is prepared to turn a blind eye to the massive impacts of those policies on local communities. Country communities have weathered an unprecedented level of attack based on economic rationalism, and the centralisation of programs and services away from country communities, particularly smaller country communities. Their access to government services, government jobs, government programs and facilities is becoming increasingly difficult.

Anyone who lives in a smaller country community in New South Wales would wonder what is going on. From time to time parts of country New South Wales agitate to be declared a separate State because they are fed up with centralisation, which pulls services, programs, funding and jobs into the larger centres and cities. Ultimately rationalisation and centralisation have a city bias. People in country New South Wales, especially those in smaller country towns, wonder why the State has legislation to protect threatened species but it has nothing to protect threatened communities. I can tell honourable members that as I travel throughout regional and rural New South Wales I realise that many smaller country towns are under threat because they lose their critical mass when the government pulls funding for infrastructure.

Mr Thomas George: Trains.

Mr ANDREW STONER: They lose their critical mass when the Government pulls funding for trains, as the honourable member for Lismore said. The bill proposes that any government, whether it is Liberal-National Coalition or Labor, be required to stop and ask: What impact will our decisions have on these smaller country communities? After all, people are important regardless of where they live in this State. Whether it is Gwabegar in the north-west of the State—

Mr Daryl Maguire: Wagga Wagga

Mr ANDREW STONER: Or Wagga Wagga, as the honourable member for Wagga Wagga said, which is a great town that has produced many sporting champions, or in the Tweed close to the Queensland border, or down south close to the Victorian border or here in Sydney. The Government and any government has a responsibility to provide equity of access to its services, programs, infrastructure and funding regardless of where a person happens to live. The Rural Communities Impacts Bill will require an impact assessment to be undertaken before these decisions are made. Therefore before the Minister for Primary Industries goes ahead and closes down agricultural research stations at places like Temora—

Mr Thomas George: There he is. He's the man.

Mr ANDREW STONER: The honourable member for Mount Druitt was a good Minister for Agriculture. He resisted this economic rationalist cry of the Treasury. But the current Minister has rolled over like a weakling to the bureaucrats, the bean counters and the economic rationalists in Treasury and flogged off the agricultural research stations. It is an absolute disgrace. We wish that the Hon. Richard Amery were back. We really do. This bill would require that before the current Minister flogs off agricultural research stations at Temora, Trangie, Deniliquin, Shannon Vale and Narara, he would have to ask what the impact would be of the proposal—and the information would be available to the public.

Before the Minister for Road cuts \$100 million out of the roads budget at a time when country roads are crumbling and dangerous and the road toll in country New South Wales is a scandal, he would have to ask what the impact would be on the community. Before the Minister for Energy and Utilities suspends the funding from country town water and sewerage programs and talks about cutting the subsidy available to local government to upgrade drinking water supplies to protect the environment, he would have to ask what the impact would be on the community and its people. Before the Minister for Local Government forcibly amalgamates local councils and shuts shire offices, he would be forced to do an assessment.

Before the Minister for Health merges area health services, taking resources out of places like Broken Hill and Tamworth, and relocates their health headquarters hundreds of kilometres away—and he has created an area health service in the west of the State that is bigger than Germany—he would have to ask what the impact would be on people in those country communities, as would the Treasurer before he milks \$250 million in extra taxes out of country clubs alone, costing 3,500 jobs and closing many country clubs. The honourable member for Tweed ought to be listening, because more than 700 jobs from his electorate alone are predicted to go as a result of this decision—that is 700 jobs in a part of the State that the Premier does not seem to understand is part of New South Wales. The Premier of Queensland talks about taking over in that area, and the people in the Tweed say, "Please, anyone but Bob Carr, we want decent representation".

If this bill were already in place, the question would have been asked about the impact on the Tweed of losing 700 jobs and the charitable donations from a once healthy club industry. The Government would have been forced to make an assessment. Before the Minister for Regional Development cuts funding to business enterprise centres, forcing their closure in towns like Cooma and Inverell, and removing services to

small businesses which, after all, are the backbone of regional communities and provide the most employment in country towns, he would be required to undertake a proper assessment of that policy.

Before the Minister for Transport Services closes country passenger rail services such as the Casino to Murwillumbah line and country branch lines such as the Gwabegar to Binnaway line and the Rankin Springs to Barmedman line, while borrowing \$2.5 billion for CityRail, he would have to consider the impacts on those country communities. The people of the Tweed are saying it is a disgrace. They do not have many transport options, and that one has just been removed. The Government has treated country people like second-class citizens. I am giving the Government the chance to get it right, to make good on the Premier's promise in 1996, which he never fulfilled, to conduct rural community impact assessments.

Mr Steve Cansdell: Another promise!

Mr ANDREW STONER: It was another promise that was never fulfilled. I am giving the Government a chance by putting in legislation that these things have to be undertaken under appropriate conditions and have to be made publicly available. It will help the Government to undertake its responsibilities to all people of New South Wales, regardless of whether they live in the city or in the country. The Rural Communities Impacts Bill is not about politics. It will apply to the current Government and future governments. It is good public policy and it is about people and local communities. If we are not taking people into account, we have lost our way as a government. We have to consider the impact on communities.

The communities in New South Wales that are struggling the most at the moment are small rural communities. One such community is in my own electorate on the mid North Coast, the community of Comboyne. Comboyne had a very high dependence on the dairy industry. It was a prosperous, beautiful community and it still is beautiful, but \$1 million in revenue to that area has been removed by dairy deregulation that was implemented back in 2001. The loss of \$1 million to a small community of around 500 people has had a massive impact. Now the shop and the club are feeling the pinch. I have grave concerns for the club, as its pressures will continue. The club has the only bowling green in the district. The club provides a sporting opportunity for the people and is also the only place they can go for a meal or a drink and some entertainment. I fear that club will close.

These impacts are cumulative in their effect on small communities. The process of economic rationalisation disadvantages small country towns and advantages the city. One only has to look at places like Comboyne and Gwabegar in the north-west. Gwabegar lost its hotel, the licence being moved to the city where there was bigger gaming turnover, so there is no hotel in Gwabegar anymore. This Government has just closed the rail line as well. All that is left in Gwabegar is a timber mill, and the Government is about to take a decision on access to the timber supply, which is cypress pine in the Pilliga region—what is called the Brigalow Belt South Bio region—and it seems the Government is again going to kowtow to the green movement and lock up vast sections of that forest. If the timber mill is gone, all the jobs in Gwabegar will be gone and there will be no town. I put that on the record, because history will use small country communities like Gwabegar and Comboyne to

judge whether this Government had a heart and cared about country people.

This bill should not be about politics. I urge Government members to vote on the principle. Any member on the Government side who represents a small country community should support this bill in a bipartisan way. Those who do not will be clearly putting politics before people. This is about good public policy. This is about openness and transparency in government. It is about communities and people, and I cannot see any reason that could be put forward by the Government to oppose this bill. Again, I say that members who represent small communities and vote against the bill will be putting politics before their own people.

I already have the support of the mayor of Broken Hill and the Independent member for Northern Tablelands. This bill may be one of the most important pieces of legislation ever put before this Parliament. It is simply about giving a fair go to country communities. It is about equity of access to government and the services that government provides for country people. If we blindly follow this ideology of economic rationalism, as evidenced in the raft of Government policies I have detailed, it will be the death of small country community after small country community. I urge the Government to support this bill. I look forward to the bipartisanship of all fair-minded members of this Parliament.