



Legislative Assembly Hansard (Extract)

Rural Communities Impacts Bill

Extract from NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard and Papers Thursday 26 October 2006.

Mr ANDREW STONER (Oxley—Leader of The Nationals) [10.04 a.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

The genesis of the Rural Communities Impacts Bill was a visit I made in late 2003 to the small rural community of Gwabegar, which is about a 90-minute drive north of Coonabarabran. I was told that the hotel had recently been sold and closed because the buyer wanted to transfer the licence to Sydney to take advantage of the poker machine licences in an area with greater turnover. The Government had also put a closed sign across the railway line to Gwabegar. Rail was the principal form of transport for goods out of the area, particularly wheat and other grains. As a result, the only way to get in and out of the town was by road. However, the condition of the local roads was suffering because of the increased use of heavy road transport. That increased use had an impact not only on the community but also on the local council.

The town still had an employer, the local timber mill, which was sourcing timber from the nearby Pilliga forest. The mill harvested iron bark, which was in great demand overseas, and white cypress pine. The pine is in demand from Japan and other parts of the world because it is completely termite resistant and does not require any chemical treatment. State Government policies have forced the mill to close. The Pilliga forests have been locked up in a national park despite the fact that 26 of 27 local stakeholder groups have said there is room for a nature reserve and a sustainable timber industry.

Anyone with any knowledge of cypress pine knows that if it is not thinned and managed it excludes all biodiversity. It becomes a monoculture because no sun will get through to the soil. As a result, there are no native grasses, flowers, insects, grazing animals or birds. There was abundant biodiversity in the logged area of that forest, including barking owls and many other birds. In fact, bird watchers from around the world come to see the local bird life. There were also many native grasses and flowers, and there were still trees, because the industry is sustainable and it wants to keep trees for future harvesting and for seed. That community lost its employer, its hotel and its railway line as a direct result of the policies and actions of the Carr-Lemma Labor Government over the past 12 years.

The town of Gwabegar, once a thriving little community, is now, basically, a ghost town. It was there, sitting in the park in Gwabegar, that I thought: We have legislation in this State to protect endangered species but we have no legislation whatsoever to protect endangered communities. There are a number of endangered communities throughout regional and rural New South Wales. Gwabegar is not the only affected community: I could reel off the names of dozens of other small rural communities that are really suffering as a result of economic rationalisation and trade liberalisation, and also as a result of the policies of the Carr-Lemma city-centric Labor Government. At that time I also thought about the fact that the former Premier, Bob Carr, had made a promise that he would consider the impacts on rural communities of government policies in this State. I subsequently checked and found that, indeed, in 1995 by way of a media release, Bob Carr stated the following:

Any major changes proposed by government departments in rural New South Wales will be subject to a rural communities impact statement.

That is good policy. I want to congratulate Bob Carr on that idea, because I have taken it up by way of a private member's bill, the Rural Communities Impacts Bill. I am endeavouring to put Bob Carr's idea into practice by way of legislation. However, it is clear that, once he had issued the media release in 1995, he promptly forgot all about that commitment because there have been literally dozens of policies from this Government that have been detrimental to regional and rural communities throughout the State.

I would like to instance some of those policies introduced in the 12 years of the Carr-Lemma Labor Government, which have affected rural communities and in respect of which there has not been any consideration of their impact upon those communities. Those policies include: cutbacks to the Department of Primary Industries budget and cut backs to staffing and resources in the areas of agriculture, mineral resources and fisheries. Those industries are crucial to the survival of communities and to local economies throughout country New South Wales, yet the front-line services available to farmers, to fishers and to miners are less than they ever have been in this State. We have witnessed the closure of agricultural research stations throughout the State. We have witnessed the closure of the agricultural college at Yanco. It is no longer an agricultural school.

What does this mean to country communities? We are in the middle of a drought, probably the worst drought on record. The agricultural research services and front-line services available to farmers have helped them to adapt and adjust to the impacts of drought. As a result of having a world-leading Department of Agriculture, built up

by the former Coalition Government and moved to Orange, and having that cutting-edge service and research, New South Wales Agriculture led the world. It developed new strains of crops and new varieties of grains—wheat, for example—that can tolerate lower levels of rainfall but which is still very high quality, and grains that are sought the world over. That is the result of putting resources into agriculture in this State. There has been assistance to enable farmers to move to sustainable farming practices, such as zero tilling, which preserves the soil and, particularly during times of drought, retains better moisture levels in the soil. It makes agriculture more sustainable.

We have seen farmers assisted with the introduction of different types of livestock, and farmers in the far west of the State destocking, moving away from cattle and becoming less reliant on sheep, and in some parts of the State introducing goats, which are appropriate for the far west. In the central western areas farmers have moved to more drought-resistant breeds of livestock. They have moved from sheep, in some cases, to cattle and vice versa, appropriate to the landscape and soil types. That is the value of an agricultural research facility and resources applied to agriculture, yet this Government has drastically cut back the budget of those agencies. I referred to the closure of the branch line to Gwabegar. Other branch lines—Rankin Springs to Barmedman, and another to The Rock, which pull out a lot of rice and other commodities—are the most efficient means of transport of bulk crops out of those country communities. Yet this Government, without any consideration of the impacts on local communities of such a decision, has closed four of 15 branch lines.

The impacts are that farmers may be forced to pay higher prices for the freight of their crops and local governments are struggling to maintain roads under the weight of increasing numbers of heavy trucks. There will be an estimated 80,000 additional truck movements each year in country New South Wales resulting from the decision to close those branch lines, and there has been no consideration of the impact on local communities. There is a road safety implication, as well, on narrow country roads where school buses are fighting to get road space in competition with large, heavy vehicles. This Government has also introduced a number of, shall I say, Greens-inspired legislation. It is the fact that farmers want to conserve their land and water. They do more at a practical level than 100 koala-suited Greens in the city. They provide wildlife corridors, and they rehabilitate streams at wetlands.

A good friend of mine, Peter Bevan, has quarantined a large part of his property in the far west of the State because it is a unique area. There is no grazing and no activity whatsoever going on in that part of his property. It has some Aboriginal art and water sources, and unique cliffs and topography. He got together with the National Parks and Wildlife Service to do that and he has effectively donated a large part of his property to the State. Farmers are the original conservationists, yet we have had a lot of legislation and regulation inspired, not by a genuine desire to preserve the New South Wales environment but by a desire to secure all the preferences of the Greens party to enable the Labor Party to retain office in New South Wales.

There was no proper consultation with affected farmers and rural communities before the introduction of that legislation, and the result has been a decline in the income of farmers, and they are spending a lot of time tied up in red tape and less time farming. They are farming less of their land, generating less income and the values of their properties have declined also. Let us assume that that legislation does deliver a public environmental good. If that is the case, why should it be entirely at the expense of the farmer? That is a very good question. There has been no consideration of the impacts of legislation such as the Native Vegetation Act and the Threatened Species Act. The environmental benefits are arguable at best when it comes to policies such as the creation of marine parks, the transfer of many State forests into national parks, or State environmental planning policy No. 14 relating to coastal wetlands.

There has been a wholesale process of creating national parks willy-nilly. We all enjoy national parks, but they must be managed to keep down the noxious weeds, to keep out the feral animals and to minimise the risk of bushfire. That has not been done in New South Wales and it has had an impact, particularly on the forest industry, and a major impact on the economies of former timber towns, including my hometown of Wauchope. It was known as the "timber town" and there were 40 timber mills around Wauchope up until the 1970s. As a result of this Government's policies, not one timber mill has been left standing. That has had an enormous impact on the local economy and on employment. As a result of 12 years of Labor's lack of consideration for rural communities, and the impacts of its policies, we are now faced with the situation that country people are four times more likely than city people to be living in a disadvantaged community.

A report titled "Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission 2002" found that education in rural and remote Australia is so poor compared with that in urban Australia that country children suffer substantial disadvantage that amounts to discrimination. Of the 40 most disadvantaged postcodes in New South Wales, 31 are in rural areas. Whilst 30 per cent of our State's population lives in country areas, 78 per cent of the most disadvantaged areas are in rural and regional New South Wales. As I said, the Government has introduced a whole host of policies that have had scant regard for the impacts upon rural communities. We have seen cutbacks to infrastructure. The Country Towns Water Supply and Sewerage Program has been underfunded for more than a decade. The funding available to country roads as a proportion of the Roads budget has declined markedly, despite the fact that 60 per cent of road fatalities in New South Wales happen on country roads. We have seen the Casino to Murwillumbah rail line—the only public transport link for people in

the far north of the State—closed by this Labor Government.

At no stage did the Government seek to evaluate the impact of its actions before it put those policies in place. As a result, the rural and regional part of our State is suffering disadvantage. There is a great divide in New South Wales. It is a divide between city and country, and that divide has been exacerbated by the policies of this Government and its failure to live up to Bob Carr's famous promise in 1995 that the impacts of the Government's actions would be considered before those actions were taken. In introducing this legislation today I give members opposite the chance to support their former leader, at least in terms of his promise, and support legislation which will require the Cabinet to have a properly developed and publicly available rural communities impact statement before Cabinet decisions are taken that will affect the lives of country people. I commend the bill to the House.