



Rural Communities Impacts Bill 2007

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Extract from NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard and Papers Thursday 31 May 2007.

Agreement in Principle

Mr ANDREW STONER (Oxley—Leader of The Nationals) [10.02 a.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now agreed to in principle.

The Rural Communities Impacts Bill 2007 is about giving country communities a fair go in terms of the decisions made by this Parliament. Most members of Parliament and most observers would acknowledge that, by the very nature of our system of representation, the Parliament is a city or metropolitan dominated place. As a result, often we see decisions of government made without due consideration of their impacts upon rural and regional communities. Some of these communities are quite vulnerable. Demographic trends have resulted in a population drift away from many of the smaller country communities throughout New South Wales.

The genesis of this bill stemmed from my visit some years ago to the town of Gwabegar, in the north-west of the State. As I sat there in the park at Gwabegar, which is near the Pilliga area, with some of the local people—Rod and Juleen Young to name a couple, who are good country people—we reflected on the way in which Gwabegar had been affected by decisions made by this Labor Government, which is now in its thirteenth year. Gwabegar had experienced the closure of its pub as a result of decisions made in relation to poker machines. It had experienced the closure of its rail line, again as a result of decisions made by this Government in relation to infrastructure investment, or lack thereof, in country areas. Gwabegar was also about to experience the closure of its sole significant employer, the timber mill, as a result of decisions made by this Government relating to the so-called Brigalow Belt South bioregion.

Gwabegar was fast becoming a ghost town. Rod and Juleen Young and I reflected on the fact that in this State we had legislation to protect threatened species but nothing whatsoever to protect threatened communities—and, I assure members, there are plenty of threatened communities throughout country New South Wales, particularly these days as a result of this record-breaking drought. Country families and communities need all the help they can get from government in New South Wales. I also reflected on the words of the then Premier, Bob Carr, in 1996. The then Premier promised that any major changes proposed by government departments in rural New South Wales would be subject to a rural communities impact statement. He said:

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

I have not seen any such rural communities impact statement; indeed, I do not think anyone has. I do not think it has ever been undertaken. Certainly it has never been made public. The public has no confidence whatsoever, in the light of decisions taken by this Government, that a rural communities impact statement has ever been undertaken, let alone taken into account. If that had occurred, how could the Government close grain rail lines around the State? How could it close a viable timber industry in the north-west of the State, which is principally based on the resource that is there, that is, the cypress pine? Incidentally, the cypress pine has now been burnt out due to a massive bushfire and a lack of hazard reduction and fire prevention management, particularly in that area. So that resource has now been lost. Hundreds of jobs, extending from Gunnedah to Gilgandra, to Gwabegar, to Baradine, even to Dubbo, have also been affected.

If a rural communities impact statement had been undertaken, the Government could not possibly have made those and other decisions. I will reflect on some of the other decisions that have been made over the life of this Government that have hurt country New South Wales, that have driven people out of small country towns, and that have driven families to move to the cities in pursuit of work. Earlier I referred to the Brigalow Belt South bioregion. Similar decisions were made in relation to the creation of new national parks on the North Coast and the South Coast. This time it was all about hardwood. It was all about appeasing the Greens; it was all about getting Greens preferences at upcoming elections—to the detriment of the workers in the timber industry in those areas.

Massive areas of State forest, which had been harvested sustainably for generations, were locked up and basically let go. These areas were pristine—indeed, so pristine that the Greens claimed them as high-conservation value icon forests. Because State Forests had maintained them so well for, in some cases, more than 150 years, the Greens wanted them. Now they are locked up, they are full of lantana, they are full of other noxious weeds and feral animals, and they are a bushfire risk. Countless country families have been affected in terms of their jobs.

What is happening to the remaining State forests? The Government did not change the timber volumes, because it was bound by a legal contract under the Regional Forest Agreement. So the remaining State forests are getting belted. Around my home town of Wauchope, as I drive down Bago Road or up the Oxley Highway it is sad to see that significant-size compartments are being felled all the way back to the road. It really is affecting the amenity of the area. The size of the timber volumes coming out is much smaller. Most of the milling is being

done by large companies instead of by family-owned mills, which can no longer survive. The mill at Bostobrick near Dorrigo in my electorate closed recently because timber milling is no longer viable. The Government did not consider the impact of its decision on rural communities. I believe it is a bad result for the environment but Bob Carr wanted the Greens preferences, and he got them.

A couple of years ago the Government purchased Yanga Station, one of the largest stations in the south-west of the State. The area had been managed sustainably for mixed primary industry, including the harvesting of red gum, raising livestock and some cropping. It provided hundreds of jobs in transport, shearing and the timber industry, with a downstream effect into communities such as Hay, Balranald and Hillston. All those jobs are now gone because the Government decided to spend \$40 million to buy Yanga Station and lock it up. But that is what the Greens wanted, and the Government gave no consideration whatsoever of the impact on rural communities. It is lovely to have another national park. We all love our Australian environment—it is beautiful. We all love our wildlife. But not too many tourists will visit that national park because the roads in country New South Wales are appalling. The Government should have spent that \$40 million fixing rural roads to enable people to visit existing national parks instead of purchasing the station and putting hundreds of country people out of work. Obviously no rural communities impact statement was produced in that instance.

There have been significant cutbacks to the Department of Primary Industries. It was once known as the agriculture department, but that has been rolled into Primary Industries. I give credit to the former Minister for Agriculture in this place, the member for Mount Druitt, who resisted calls by Treasury bureaucrats for cutbacks to agriculture. The agriculture department evolved under previous Coalition governments, which allocated resources to ensure that New South Wales was at the cutting edge of agriculture in the global marketplace. Our farmers are successful because we put resources into extending services and providing support on the ground. We allocated resources for researching new crop and livestock varieties that are better equipped to cope with drought conditions, for example, and that are more marketable in the global marketplace.

However, in the past few years the Government has cut hundreds of millions of dollars from agriculture. That is a very short-sighted decision. The Government has closed research facilities, including some on the Northern Tablelands, the Central Coast and in other parts of the State. The bureaucrats claim that research facilities can be centralised. That is nonsense because the geography and climatic conditions are completely different throughout New South Wales. For example, soy beans cannot be grown in the colder areas of the State and new livestock varieties, particularly sheep, cannot be developed on the North Coast but will go well on the Northern Tablelands. We must have specialised facilities in different parts of the State. However, many such facilities have been closed and "rationalised". The long-term impact of this policy will be dire because the competition in primary production is cutthroat at present. Australia, particularly New South Wales, is in danger of losing its position as a producer of the best of the best—our traditional role. The Government must allocate the resources necessary to ensure that we maintain our position in a competitive environment.

There are 15 grain rail lines throughout the State, and the Government has closed four of them. What is the impact of that decision? Freight costs for the State's grain farmers will potentially increase, there will be more trucks on the road and greenhouse gas emissions will escalate. I do not line up with the Greens on many issues, but I do on this occasion because it is just plain bad policy that affects rural communities adversely. It even affects the safety of country children, who must travel on narrow regional roads that are in an appalling state, partly as a result of the drought but partly as a result of this Government's lack of maintenance funding. School buses must share country roads with huge trucks carrying large quantities of grain. The Government did not consider the impact of its decision to close those grain lines.

On the subject of rail, I see that the member for Tweed is in the Chamber. His constituency on the far North Coast appears to have disappeared off the map as far as the State Government is concerned. In fact, some communities in that area that have been hammered by a range of government decisions and a lack of priority and attention have sought to become part of Queensland. That is how bad the situation is. The big issue in that region is the Government's decision to close the Casino to Murwillumbah rail line, which is one of the reasons the Tweed is now represented by a member on this side of the House. That rail line serviced a number of communities from Casino, to Bangalow and Ballina, up to Murwillumbah and the Tweed.

The Queensland Government is forging ahead with rail infrastructure, extending the line to Coolangatta. But the New South Wales Government closed the Casino to Murwillumbah line. Why? It is because the bean counters—the economic rationalists—declared that the line was not generating enough money. It is okay for the Government to subsidise CityRail to the tune of \$1.5 billion yet the Casino to Murwillumbah rail line must pay its own way. That is a double standard; it is hypocrisy. It is an insult to country people to treat them as second-class citizens.

Mr Steve Whan: We want some money from the Feds for rail lines.

Mr ANDREW STONER: The Casino to Murwillumbah line is a branch line so it is clearly a State Government responsibility. The member for Monaro is trying to play politics. I will never know how he can call himself a Country Labor member. He is playing politics on an issue that is clearly a State Government responsibility. The State Government decided to close the Casino to Murwillumbah rail line and as a result local communities have been affected adversely. No rural communities impact statement was produced. The Premier decided recently to extend daylight saving.

Mr Steve Whan: Beauty!

Mr ANDREW STONER: "Beauty!" says the member for Monaro. But a lot of people in western New South Wales do not love daylight saving. Did the Government consult those people? No, it did not. What reason did the Government give for its decision? It said it is because Tasmania is doing it. Tasmania is the new leader of

this nation! New South Wales, the once great premier State, now takes its lead from Tasmania. Do not worry about country people. Do not worry that children will have to get up in the dark to catch the school bus when daylight saving is extended. Tasmania wants daylight saving, so that is okay. The Government makes decision after decision, with no consideration of the impact. It does not produce rural communities impact statements. I would be grateful if the Premier would show me the rural communities impact statement for that decision. But I do not think he will because it does not exist.

The Government has committed \$2 billion for a desalination plant that people in Sydney do not want. But where is the money to invest in water infrastructure to help country communities through this drought and to help them prepare for the next drought? There is a project in far western New South Wales, the Menindee Lakes scheme, that the experts agree will save massive quantities of water, which could be made available for environmental flows and town water supplies. The water quality at Broken Hill could be improved. The scheme involves engineering works on the Menindee Lakes, which currently permit massive evaporation because they are not regulated properly. We could do the necessary work for a fraction of the \$2 billion that this Government plans to spend on a hated desalination plant. The scheme could also solve some problems with the Murray-Darling Basin. But the project will not happen. Why? It is because the Government has decided to spend all the money in the city.

This Government has made a decision to continue the imposition of fixed water charges on the State irrigators. Nobody has been hit harder by this drought than the State irrigators because the irrigators have relatively high cost structures: they invest in irrigation systems and they invest in ways to try and conserve water but still make a decent income from farming. But they require water and the prolonged nature of this drought has meant that our water storages are very, very low—in some cases less than 10 per cent, but most of the State dams would be around the 20 per cent mark. Here in the city we get very excited if our water storage level gets down towards 30 per cent but things are far worse in country New South Wales: when storage levels get very low the first thing that happens is that water allocations to irrigators are cut.

Irrigators have costs; they have borrowed for infrastructure, but they have no incomes. We have seen this in the Lachlan Valley, where the irrigators have had little or no allocation of water for probably five years. During a drought summit convened by New South Wales farmers the Minister for Primary Industries agreed to waive those fixed water charges for a period of 12 months. That was much appreciated, but what about the other farmers throughout the State? The Namoi irrigators will receive little or no allocation this year. I spoke to a cotton farmer in the Namoi just last week and due to a downturn in the world price for cotton and the fact that this farmer has no water, he is taking a loss in the millions of dollars.

The rice farmers along the Murrumbidgee and Murray have had little or no water allocation. Those impacts affect entire communities due to a lack of money in the region. Yet this Government is issuing bills for fixed water charges to irrigators and driving them to the wall. We have heard tragic cases of the suicide of farmers brought about by the depressing nature of their financial situation. But this Government will not waive those fixed water charges. Where is the consideration of the impact of that decision?

Recently the Bells Line Expressway issue was raised in this place. The Federal Government committed \$10 million towards progressing studies to make this road a reality. The expressway will open up the central west and encourage investment and will have road safety and environmental benefits. The NRMA and everybody are for it. Given that this is a State road I think it was very generous of the Federal Government to contribute \$10 million. But when the Federal Government asked for \$10 million from the lemma Labor Government, Eric the Red said no and knocked it back. He is happy to spend \$25 million to defer the tunnel funnel measures for the Lane Cove Tunnel until after the election but he is not happy to spend \$2 million to progress a project that will benefit the State, and particularly rural and regional New South Wales. Again, there has been no consideration of the impact of that decision on country New South Wales.

In relation to rural health, the shadow Minister for Health is in the Chamber and she has apprised me that this Government has closed more than half the State's small maternity wards, despite medical evidence that for the great majority of births it is safer for country women to give birth closer to their families and closer to their communities. We heard the tragic news last year of a young mother who was flown from Cobar to Dubbo because this Government had closed the Cobar maternity ward. There were problems with the birth: the birth was in mid air on an emergency flight, the baby was premature and it died because of the delays. I do not know but I would imagine had the maternity ward been open and had the medical staff been able to attend to the mother locally, the baby may well be alive today. That sort of tragedy can result from decisions that are made with no consideration of the impact on rural people.

Mr Daryl Maguire: What about renal dialysis?

Mr ANDREW STONER: An Aboriginal man in Kempsey needs dialysis and he has to go to Newcastle—a four-hour drive each way. He spends four hours in the dialysis chair and has to turn around and drive another four hours home. This man is quite unwell and he has a 12-hour day, twice a week, to attend Newcastle. It is a disgrace. The Nationals continue to call for an inquiry into rural health because people are dying. I am not trying to be sensationalist about this. People are falling through the cracks because the system is being centralised away from country communities and patients are being affected. Again, decisions are being made without consideration of the impact on rural communities. Where is the rural community impact statement?

The decision to stop funding for the Country Towns Water and Sewerage Scheme impacts on the ratepayers who are paying load-based licensing to the Environment Protection Authority. The quality of the water affects the attractiveness of a country town for a family to move to because the water may be crook or there is not a

proper sewerage system. The amount of water available also has an impact because we do not have recycling systems that could be used for irrigation, like the terrific one at Dubbo out at Greengrove—although the council had to pay for that because it got no help from this Government.

The Government stopped funding for the replacement of timber bridges and now in some communities schoolchildren have to hop off the bus before it goes across the timber bridge because the bridge would not cope with a loaded bus. The children have to walk across the bridge and then hop back on the bus. How disgraceful is that in the twenty-first century! Yet this Government made a decision to stop the funding with clearly no consideration of the impact on rural communities.

Mr Steve Whan: What do you think the timber bridges program is?

Mr ANDREW STONER: The timber bridges program was introduced by the former Coalition Government but was stopped by this Government for years. Only under pressure—and I still have not seen any money flowing—the Government belatedly adopted The Nationals' policies and reintroduced the program. It is no wonder the so-called Country Labor faction has been reduced to a rump of just two in this House—the member for Monaro and the member for Bathurst. Country Labor lost the seats of Tweed and Murray-Darling, and next election we are going after the seats of Monaro and Bathurst because those members failed to stand up for country people in this place.

Mr Steve Whan: That is what you said last time. You have dropped 22 per cent in three elections.

Mr ANDREW STONER: Mate, put your money where your mouth is and support this bill.

Mr Steve Whan: It is a replay of the last time. We debated this last time and you failed.

Mr ANDREW STONER: You voted against this bill. The Independents voted for this bill because they knew it was a good idea. It was Bob Carr's idea to have a rural communities impact statement but he never followed through on it. Like a lot of things he said he would do, he did not do it. We are going to make this legislation so that the Government cannot weasel out of it. We are not going to allow the Government to pretend it is considering impacts on rural communities, then go ahead and make decisions based on Greens preferences and not country people. We are going to legislate this so that country people are assured that Government considers their interests—this holds true for a Coalition Government. We are happy to be open and transparent, and if somebody asks where a rural communities impact statement is on a certain issue we can say, "Here it is. We have considered it". But when we have a Government that is so Sydney-centric—

Mr Daryl Maguire: Out of touch.

Mr ANDREW STONER: And out of touch with country New South Wales, heed the warning: We saw what happened in the last election and if this continues, Labor—a once proud party of the bush, based on the shearers and the miners—will be obliterated from country New South Wales. But one of the two remaining Country Labor members could stand up and support this bill if he wanted to; it may stop some of the rot. There is a Cabinet in this State with just two members out of 22 who hail from outside the metropolitan block. I refer to Tony Kelly from Wellington and Ian Macdonald, who hails originally from Melbourne but has a property up near Carcoar, I think. They are both in the other place. Two Country Labor members out of 22—and there is some argument about that—represent country New South Wales. More than half the Coalition's shadow Cabinet hails from outside the metropolitan block, which is the sort of balance country people need but clearly are not getting.

This is a simple bill that requires the preparation of a rural community impact statement for decisions taken by Cabinet that affect areas outside the metropolitan block. The bill defines "rural" as areas outside the Newcastle, Sydney and Wollongong block. If Cabinet makes a decision that has an impact on those areas, an impact statement must be produced and made available to the public. This simple bill puts into legislation the broken promise of Bob Carr. It will enable country people to have the confidence that their interests are being properly represented in government. I commend the bill to the House.