



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 1) 2002-03

Consideration in Detail

SPEECH

Wednesday, 19 June 2002

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Page 3969
Questioner
Speaker Katter, Bob, MP

Source House
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Responder
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Mr KATTER (Kennedy) (5.26 pm)—It amazes me that GBRMPA, one of the biggest manifestations in Australia of the Department of the Environment and Heritage, is so universally loathed and detested. It is hard for most people in North Queensland to even mention its name without getting into a rage. There is no doubt that there will be really unfortunate occurrences as a result of actions taken by GBRMPA. You cannot expect that all of the people in Australia's sugar industry who are going to be closed down by GBRMPA will just sit there and idly twiddle their thumbs whilst their lives are destroyed. GBRMPA has stated publicly—not privately but publicly and unequivocally; and it was reinforced by the environment minister at the time of the last election, Minister Hill—that it would enforce the diminution by half of the sedimentation being carried in the rivers.

One of the strongest green advocates, the chairman of the Johnstone River Trust—a person who has a lot of courage because he has to stand up to the farmers all the time on these issues—rang me and said, 'We have had many fights before but no way am I defending this one.' I said, 'How bad is this?' He said, 'I would think that you would be looking at the closure of at least a quarter, maybe a third, of the sugar industry of North Queensland.' I say to those people who think this is not going to happen that we did not think it was possible that it would happen in the timber industry. We were given all sorts of assurances at the time of the World Heritage declaration. The government said no, it would not close the industry; that the industry would, at the very most, lose 800 jobs. The most minimal estimate is that the timber industry has lost 3,000 jobs. There are only three mills left in North Queensland and one of them is working off plantation timber. Arguably, there are four timber mills but they are tiny little mills. In fact, as you drive along the main highway you can see that some 12 mills have been closed—each with 100 or 200 employees—and they stand as a monument to the inhumanity of the Australian government to the people of North Queensland. They reacted with great violence towards the minister at the time. If anyone thinks that if GBRMPA proceeds down this pathway it will not result in confrontation of a very unpleasant nature, then they believe in the tooth fairy.

If you think you are going to destroy everything that these people have built up generation after generation in North Queensland, you are wrong. Many of their forebears cut cane in the mud and amongst disease and snakes and crocodiles and floods. They were wiped out again and again. They had to fight the monopoly of the Colonial Sugar Refining Co. for nearly 30 years. They got paid nothing. Cane cutters' hands were such that you could press a pin into them to a depth of a quarter of an inch and there would be no feeling at all. This was really hard and dangerous work which had very high fatality rates. Generation after generation of contribution to the wealth of this country is going to be destroyed by a bunch of city slickers who have never set foot outside their concrete pleasure domes in Townsville to venture onto the reef—none of them I know are fishermen, none of them I know are scuba divers, none of those I know have manifested any affection for the reef whatsoever. A very interesting manifestation of that is the crown-of-thorns starfish. It has been a controversial issue for probably 40 or 50 years now. There has not been one single act by GBRMPA about the problem of the crown-of-thorns starfish. You have to ask yourself: just how genuine are these people? Is this an exercise in power over and violence committed on other people? A lot of people get a big buzz out of exercising judgment. I am sure that a lot of judges, when they pass judgments upon people, get the opposite of unpleasantness out of it. I am sure that some of this is manifest in these people. (*Time expired*)