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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

Main Committee

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Forestry Industry

SPEECH

Monday, 18 October 2010

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Page 171	Proof Yes
Questioner	Responder
Speaker Sidebottom, Sid, MP	Question No.

Mr SIDEBOTTOM (Braddon) (8.18 pm)—I stand today to speak in support of the motion of my good friend, colleague and cousin, the member for Lyons, at a time when the forestry industry in our home state is at a real crossroads. For many years forestry has been a battleground and political football in my state, particularly around election time—something I know only too well by bitter experience. But finally, hopefully, we are seeing both sides of the argument working towards a lasting agreement. That may not be soon enough for some in the industry, unfortunately.

During the election, I was pleased that we as the Labor Party promised to provide \$20 million to help forest contractors and their employees, a sector suffering severely during the downturn of the forest industry. I know that the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Senator Ludwig, is working through the details of the type of assistance the government will provide, who will be eligible for assistance and when assistance will be provided. On a number of occasions, I have sat with people from the industry—decent, hardworking people—who are being pushed to the edge by the financial pressures they are under. I have visited them out in the bush and in their workshops and seen them at work. They are good people who do valuable work. These people have built what they thought would be a business which contributed to the many communities which depend on forestry. They employ many people; some of them are family and many of them are just like family, such is the nature of these small businesses in close-knit communities. Now, because of a whole variety of factors, many well beyond their own control, they are facing financial ruin. I truly do not know how some of these people are able to sleep at night with the burden of their financial troubles.

The challenge for us now as legislators, state and federal, is to find the middle ground and provide a lasting framework to secure the future for those who remain in the industry. This should set a course where we can have a valuable forest industry which sustains strong regional communities and where conflict is just part of history. I want to be able to see these people be proud of their part in an industry which is creating a stable environment for people to work in, an industry that is renewable, sustainable and significant—the forestry industry. We must create an industry that can invest and plan for the future without—as my colleagues have mentioned—fear that it could be derailed with the stroke of a pen at some political whim or by a poorly chosen set of words. We do not want an industry that has to invest more in security than it does in the safety of its workers just so those workers can go about their daily duties. We want an industry where forest workers can be proud to stand up and say that they are so, wherever and with whoever they may be.

This can be done without jeopardising the future of our great native forests and the environment which we all treasure. Nobody wants to see this great forest resource wasted or sold for a pittance. We want an industry where they can invest in the best of downstream processing so that they can be competitive worldwide and not have to do so with the fear that it could all be taken away. This is an industry that is no small contributor to the Tasmanian economy and employment, particularly in regional areas. In 2006 a report into the industry by Dr Jacki Schirmer put the annual spend by forestry industries in Tasmania at about \$1.6 billion, employing 6,300 people. Tasmanian forestry exports were estimated to be worth \$443 million, or 13 per cent of exports, in the 2008-09 year, according to ABARE statistics. Importantly, a majority of these people and companies work in native forests. If we are to see a shift away from native forest logging then it will mean a massive change in the industry. Given that we are talking about something which could impact on three per cent of the Tasmanian workforce directly, and many more indirectly, then we must do everything we can to get it right and to cushion the blow.

The forest industries are an important, significant part of my region and of Tasmania as a whole and we must do everything we can to ensure their future is a positive one. The best thing to do to achieve this is to provide formally agreed certitude beyond the whim of political parties and with the agreement of the Tasmanian community. On a final note, it is crucial that the agreement, as it reaches its final stages, must support value adding, and in my region this means guaranteeing resource security for Britton Timbers and Ta Ann, both users of native hardwoods.