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River Red Gum Conservation Measures Legislative Assembly 11 November 2009

Mr MORRIS (Mornington) — The river red gums bill is a totally wasted opportunity.

We had the opportunity tonight to address the issues that will come before us again and again in the next century, to change the way we approach these problems, to change our thinking, to introduce a new thinking and to introduce a new approach and a new way of protecting these iconic forests. We had the opportunity of working with the people in the community right along the river throughout the north of the state. We had the opportunity to work with everyone who has a connection with these forests, which clearly is a lot more people than actually live in the area.

Sadly, that opportunity has been lost.

What is perhaps worse, is the total hypocrisy in the way this package has been presented. It has been presented as the definitive method to solve the problem. It has been presented as the definitive and only way of protecting these ancient forests. They are a precious resource, this precious natural system, precious ecosystem. This bill is not about action that will protect forests. This is in fact a bill which will, in all reality, hasten their end.

This is a bill about diversion, about feint and about distraction. It is an effort to draw attention away from the inaction we are seeing from the government on this issue. Government members are hoping the inadequacy of their response to this challenge will be lost in this sense of action. They are hoping by the time the lack of results actually shows, they will be long gone. Unfortunately I suspect that by the time the inadequacy of their actions becomes apparent, the forests will be well on the way to being long gone as well.

What does the bill achieve? It creates a number of parks, including Barmah, Gunbower, Lower Goulburn, Warby-Ovens on the Murray, Goulburn and Ovens rivers, Nyah-Vinifera, Kings Billabong, Gadsen Bend on the Murray, and regional parks at Kerang and Shepparton. It expands existing parks, including Hattah-Kulkyne, Mount Buffalo, Murray-Sunset, Terrick Terrick, Leagur State Park and Murray-Kulkyne Park.

It also establishes the framework for the proposed Murray River park. When you look at the provision of the bill that relates to the proposed Murray River park, clause 30 of the bill, you can see that it is — and I am sure this has been remarked on by previous speakers — simply an enabling clause to allow the minister to make a

recommendation to the Governor in Council. This means that any land that is reasonably required for the purposes of the regional park to be known as the Murray River park will be incorporated on the basis of a recommendation of the minister to the Governor in Council.

This is a significant park in its own right. It is 35 000 hectares or thereabouts — virtually a quarter of the total land we are talking about in relation to this bill. Yet the boundaries are not fully surveyed; the mapping is not complete. We should, as a principle, not accept any legislation that does not define or make available to the Parliament the precise boundaries to be incorporated in the park. There is absolutely no reason why this could not come back in a few weeks time, once the necessary work is done, and be dealt with by the Parliament. It should not be dealt with by the Governor in Council.

That is the extent of the government's response to what is truly a crisis: new management arrangements and new titles for parcels of land. In the whole second-reading speech there is only one paragraph that talks about improved environmental outcomes. One paragraph — that is the sum total. It is instructive to look at what the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council had to say on page xv of its final report:

The most urgent and serious environmental problem in the investigation area is the imminent loss or degradation of large areas of wetlands and riverine forests as a result of greatly reduced frequency of flooding. This reduced frequency of flooding is already having substantial negative impacts on natural values (especially biodiversity) ... Many tens of thousands of hectares of forests and wetlands habitats may be lost without adequate water in the near future.

Changes to public land use categories alone will not be sufficient to address this problem.

We have here a series of changes to the status of the land, but we have no environmental flows and no real plan to fix the problems.

The government came to this debate with a fixed view, with an agenda. It intended to impose this agenda on the community in northern Victoria, whether the community liked it or not. It had absolutely no regard for whether its prescription for the ailment was going to work.

You only have to look at the appointments to the so-called community engagement panel to understand where this was coming from. These include John McQuilten, former Labor member for Ballarat Province in the other place and recipient of many other government appointments; Craig Cook, former chief of staff to the Treasurer and the Minister for State and Regional Development and recipient of many other government appointments; and, similarly, Bob Smith and Joan Burns. This was about imposing the government's prescription on the people of northern Victoria.

Many other coalition speakers have touched on the heritage that the Liberal Party and The Nationals bring into this debate. We understand land management and we have a long and proud history of protecting the environment of this state, going back to the establishment of the Land Conservation Council (LCC) in the early 1970s and the

national parks that were established under premiers Bolte, Hamer and Kennett. I must say one of my earliest brushes with State government was of fronting up at what I guess was a forerunner of Information Victoria in St Andrews Place some time in the 1970s to pick up some of those early LCC reports.

The LCC understood that you need to bring science to the management of public land. You need to put in place all necessary steps to protect the land and to do everything that needs to be done. You cannot simply change the title and hope for the best; you have to manage the land. It must be a scientific approach; it cannot be an emotive approach. Emotion is good, but it does not protect the territory.

We on this side of the house know that you need to provide resources. You need to provide the ability to manage and protect land properly — —

Business interrupted pursuant to standing orders.

Mr MORRIS (Mornington) — As I was saying, we on this side know what we need to do in terms of providing the resources to manage public land. That is what is not in the bill before the house. There is no attempt to deal with the necessary fire prevention works or park management issues. Most of all there is no effort to deal with the critical issue of environmental flows. They were removed, as we have heard, by the express direction of the Premier.

To conclude, I paraphrase the words of the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council report: you can change public land categories, but without adequate water that will not be sufficient to prevent tens of thousands of hectares being lost. That, I fear, will be the fate of the river red gums under this bill.
