



The Hon. Tony Burke MP

T R A N S C R I P T

Grazing in Alpine National Park

E&OE Transcript

Press conference, The Great Ocean Road

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JOURNALIST: Okay Minister well first of all we know about the [cattle] are currently rounding up the cattle. If they're not out by Friday what actually happens?

TONY BURKE: Well if they're not out by Friday then the Victorian Government's in breach of national environmental law. They've been given a deadline by which they have to refer it and if they don't refer it then I have the option of doing that. If I take that option, then from the moment I take it is unlawful for the cattle to be there in the national park.

JOURNALIST: At what point, what does actually you taking it over and taking [unclear] actually mean?

TONY BURKE: It quite simply, it simply means this. We - the cattle have to be out, we will then have to decide whether or not Victoria has breached national environmental law. That will take some time to work through. Now that's a legal question that has to be answered. Certainly on the information they provide so far, this whole thing is just rotten to the core and doesn't stack up.

But once we get the referral we'll seek more information from them. But between now and then it's open to the Victorian Government to just say they got it wrong. It's completely open to the Victorian Government to say that the graziers, those handful of families, can do the same as every other farmer in Australia. And that's provide their own feed for their cattle.

JOURNALIST: But do you feel for those graziers though because they've mounted a campaign in a democratic country. The election was decided in that particular electorate on this issue, they thought they won the issue

and now they're the meat in the sandwich aren't they? They've done the right thing, they've gone to the people and now they're being forced out.

TONY BURKE: Well we're dealing with what's the law of Australia and I don't think anybody ever has a right to break the law of Australia. Whether they have or not we'll find out in full detail when this gets referred. It should have happened back in January. Back in January it was open to the Victorian Government to do what every Australian business does and every other state government does, when they've got a major project that they think could have an environmental impact. And that's, they contact my department and they check.

Victoria for whatever reason decided that they were above Australian environmental law and wouldn't even bother to conduct the most basic checks that every Australian business conducts.

JOURNALIST: Do you have though any sympathy for the cattlemen is the question I'm asking?

TONY BURKE: The biggest error here was made by the Victorian Government. My view, and I spent the last three years going and working with farmers from all around Australia when I was the Agriculture Minister. My view is really simple. When you're growing beef cattle you feed your cattle and you pay to feed your cattle. I don't think that's too big an ask of any farmer. And almost every farmer in Australia abides by those rules.

JOURNALIST: You've already, you mentioned back there before you were speaking with your department about introducing I take it new laws to prevent this happening in the future. Can you just run us through that, what that involves and what process you're up to with that at the moment?

TONY BURKE: I've now started to get advice from my department to work out what extra layers of protection we can provide for national parks. We just presume that once something is protected as a national park, there'd be no steps backwards. And the environmental debate in Australia was to work out where could we add layers of protection? Or where could we better manage what we'd already protected.

This is a massive precedent for a government to consciously take a step backwards. At the moment, that principle isn't reflected in national environmental law. My department is now in the process of getting all the advice to me to work out how we might add that layer of protection.

JOURNALIST: Would that then mean that cattle [could be put back in the same national park] if that goes through?

TONY BURKE: It might already be illegal and I can't prejudge that until we have all the information. So this particular action may already be unlawful under national environmental law. Once we find out the answer to that question, that's a legal question. There's still the principle that quite simply I believe what the Victorian Government has done is wrong. I believe our national parks have enough problems already with invasive species and we shouldn't be deliberately introducing new problems.

If we need to look at further legislation to be able to do that, then that path will be prepared.

JOURNALIST: So either way - sorry.

JOURNALIST: I was just going to say have you spoken to the Victorian Government about what their plans are this week - you've around Parliament House?

TONY BURKE: I've been around Parliament House. I ended up not meeting with the Environment Minister while I was there. I met with my other counterpart ministers and made myself available. But the meeting, for whatever reason, didn't come together. So I don't know what they plan.

All I know is that publicly they've said the cattle will be out by Friday and next week there will be people from my department checking that that has occurred.

JOURNALIST: And also in terms of - are you now confident that no matter what happens, however way you can make it work, after Friday these cattle won't be returned?

TONY BURKE: I'm not prejudging the decision that will be presented to me in a few weeks' time and however many months it takes to get that information together. What I do know is a really simple principle which I believe environmental law should eventually reflect and it may already. I don't know. But there is a principle that I think is worth defending. And that's that you don't take backward steps in our national parks, you don't deliberately introduce a new invasive species.

JOURNALIST: Apparently most of them, the cows are already out. Is that what you've heard?

TONY BURKE: We've had verbal advice from the Victorian Department about a week ago that of the six sites, two of them had been cleared. Whether there all out yet or not, I don't know the answer to that. You'd have to refer that to the Victorian Department. Okay.

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