



The Hon. Tony Burke MP

T R A N S C R I P T

ABC 702 interview with Deb Cameron

E&OE Only

ABC 702 interview with Deb Cameron, 21 March 2011

DEB CAMERON: Now just imagine if a mob of cattle got loose in the Royal Botanic Gardens. That's the area that you know best where there are trees and lovely glades and beautiful little preserved areas of wildness in our midst. What do you reckon would happen if you turned a couple of cows in there let alone a whole mob of them? Well they would drink hundreds of litres of water, they would reach up into the trees as high as their necks could crane, their heavy feet would squash absolutely everything in its paths.

Now, of course a national park is not the Royal Botanic Gardens but a national park is an asset none the less. The new Liberal and National Victorian Government have turned cattle back into the high country Alpine National Park. The decision has prompted a very strong response from the federal Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities.

Tony Burke joins me now. Minister, good morning.

TONY BURKE: Good morning Deborah.

DEB CAMERON: You have set a deadline for Victoria to get the cattle out, what is your thinking for setting that deadline?

TONY BURKE: Normally, when someone wants to take an action that's going to have some significant environmental risk associated with it they refer it to us to check for federal environmental approvals.

For reasons that I won't pretend I fully understand, but people can probably guess, Victoria decided to not check this one with us at all and over January, secretly, got the cattle reintroduced to that national park, the Alpine National Park.

Now, it wasn't as you've seen on the TV, images of drovers riding up the hill on horseback. They took them on a truck, unloaded them and for a handful of families, they got to feed their cattle on free grass and the damage to the national park in just a few weeks was quite extraordinary.

DEB CAMERON: Are you concerned by the precedent this might set, national parks are pretty fundamental idea, they are a national asset not for state governments to plunder. How worried are you by this precedent?

TONY BURKE: I was really concerned about the precedent on this one. If you think back about what the environmental arguments have been about for a long time, it's been about whether extra areas should be put into a national park, whether extra areas should be available for protection.

I can't think of the last time where a government consciously wanted to take a step backwards in a national park. So I do think as a matter of principle that it was really important to be able to do something about this. Now, the issue is not closed yet, all we have been able to do so far is make sure that they have to refer it to us.

So, by the 8th of April the cattle have to be out and either Victoria voluntarily refers the matter to me or I've got the option then of forcing the referral and going ahead with the assessment. So as a matter of law I've got to follow all the processes and make the judgements on that. As a matter of principle, I just think it's wrong to turn a national park into a farm.

DEB CAMERON: Now they have said that it's bushfire mitigation, that the National Parks and Wildlife Service have done a poor job of maintaining grass levels at a fire proof kind of range. Do you have any sympathy with that view?

TONY BURKE: Victoria had a Royal Commission into the causes of bushfire. There were a series of recommendations that came out of it, none of them were to do with cattle.

After previous bushfires studies have been done where they looked at the areas that had been grazed and looked at the areas that have not been grazed - no significant difference at all.

The alleged scientific study - they never did a baseline, they didn't send scientists in before the cattle arrived to check what it was like so how they were meant to tell the difference I can't work out.

The whole thing looks a lot more like political science than any other form of science. Let's not forget where the families that are getting the free grass for their cattle come from are all in a significant marginal seat in a Government that got a majority of one.

DEB CAMERON: Now will you try and hold the state financially liable or these families financially liable for damage done to the national park?

TONY BURKE: The damage issue, this is one of the extraordinary things about it, it's Victoria's national park in terms of the asset itself. The damage they've done is actually to an area that they were responsible for looking after and taking care of.

The only reason we've been able to get involved is because there are issues with endangered communities and endangered species, issues that fall squarely within my responsibility that's allowed the intervention.

It's one of those things, I don't think we can walk away from. As the Federal Minister, I can't fix everything that a state government might want to do and there are times when you get a change in Government and it does result in a worse environmental outcome. Hopefully this one we end up being legally able to stop.

DEB CAMERON: Now, of course, you are talking about some pretty emotional iconography here as well. You opened by saying that this wasn't drovers lazily, languidly standing under the shade while the cattle are grazed. But that is often the image that people have in their minds, I mean some of the great pictures of the Australian wilderness have included a drover, some cattle - it's a lovely scene.

TONY BURKE: I know, and it's hard to get a TV story on this without hearing the music from The Man From Snowy River playing in the background. That movie also began with a couple of people chopping down a tree, we don't do that in national parks anymore either.

When an area is designated for protection, it is designated for protection. There are a whole lot of areas in the high country that are not part of the national park where those families are still able to graze their cattle. But, ultimately, we've got some really precious ecosystems, some really precious environmental places in Australia and they're not looked after by cattle stomping all over endangered wetlands.

When I went up there the cattle had only been in there for four weeks, in that time alone the wetland that I saw, about a quarter had already turned into mud. That was only in four weeks, it doesn't take long to wreck some really precious places.

DEB CAMERON: So tell me about your visit, when were you there? How many cattle did you see?

TONY BURKE: I only saw a couple where I was. When cars arrive cattle don't tend to come up to say g'day. The mere fact that we were there caused them to move away.

I don't want to pretend that cattle are the only problem in a national park; there are problems with deer, there are problems with the brumbies, there's a whole lot of introduced species, be it feral cats, foxes that cause massive problems. The significance with all the others though is that everyone agrees that we should be getting the numbers down on every other pest or invasive species.

On this occasion the cattle were deliberately and knowingly introduced by a government. That's a very different step to anything we have seen before.

You could see the spots that had been trampled, you could see wetlands had already started to turn to mud. That was in four weeks, it doesn't take them long.

DEB CAMERON: Now if they fail to get those cattle out by the first week of April, what will you do? Will the cattle be shot?

TONY BURKE: There are massive fines under the Act and Victoria have said that they will get them out. I have been surprised enough by the steps that they've taken so far and the way they've behaved. But I do think that for them to knowingly breach federal law, now that they have been notified by us, is probably a step too far even given their recent behaviour.

DEB CAMERON: Thank you very much for your time this morning Minister.

TONY BURKE: Good to talk to you.

DEB CAMERON: That was Tony Burke, Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities.

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