


THE AUSTRALIAN

Labor's dirty deal to stop land clearing

By **MATT CANAVAN**

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A legend and pioneer of the Australian cattle industry, Maurice Binstead, died last month.

On returning from war in Papua New Guinea, Maurice and his wife, Doris, bought an unloved brigalow block in central Queensland. Brigalow scrub had defeated all comers in the past. The early settlers had tried to tame it but an axe was no match.

Others had pulled it down, but the brigalow suckers were so resilient the trees soon would grow back. Many gave up turning vast swathes of central Queensland into productive pastoral country.

Maurice was determined to get a different result. With his friend, John Kirk, they succeeded using a combination of tractor and fire. Success bred imitation - eventually state and federal governments funded the Brigalow Development Scheme, offering loans to farmers to develop their country and increase agricultural productivity. Beef production boomed. This week the beef industry from around the world converges on Rockhampton for the triennial Beef Week. The fact Rockhampton can call itself the beef capital is due to the hard work and invention of Maurice.

Yet, instead of honouring his memory, the Queensland government has passed laws that make what Maurice did illegal.

The Queensland legislation is a culmination of a backroom deal done between the Queensland Labor Party and the Queensland Greens. Labor announced its policy on tree-clearing the weekend before preference deals were finalised for the last state

election.

The parliamentary committee that looked at the bill received more than 12,000 form submissions from WWF, Greenpeace and the Wilderness Society. The Labor Party now listens to protesters rather than producers.

Among other things, the legislation removes the ability for farmers to clear their land to produce high-value agriculture. The potential clearing of land is an economic right that farmers had. They have bought and sold land based on these rights.

About 1.7 million hectares of land would be locked up under the changes. One grazier estimates that at \$1000 an hectare, about \$1.7 billion worth of agricultural land has been stolen by the state government. The Labor Party has stripped these rights away without giving a cent of compensation.

Further, the new law makes a farmer guilty before they can prove themselves innocent, and it is retrospective too, capturing land clearing back to the introduction of the bill in March.

The laws affect indigenous Australians in an even more unfair way. The Wik and Wik Way peoples fought a long battle to recover their land rights, which they have enjoyed for only a quarter of a century. Many in the indigenous movement saw the Labor Party as allies in this fight but they have been betrayed.

As the Cape York Land Council said to the parliamentary committee: "Much of the economy of Queensland is driven by land cleared many years ago, but Cape York is not allowed to reap some economic benefits ... Aboriginal people should have the opportunity to develop just like the rest of people in Queensland have been able to in the south. We do not think it is reasonable that the Queensland government inflicts such a penalty on people who have already had to bear so much over recent history."

The Land Council has legal advice that the new laws could breach the Australian Constitution. The federal government will consider any such advice and monitor any legal action that is taken.

Certainly these Queensland laws threaten the Australian government's agenda to develop northern Australia by locking up so much productive land.

There is no evidence that Labor's anti-farmer and anti-indigenous regulations will help the environment either. The Labor government failed to conduct a regulation impact statement, and the government's explanatory notes to the bill state that "stakeholders have not been specifically consulted on the bill".

If they had bothered to consult those who work the land, they would have heard from Bill Burrows, former principal scientist at the Department of Primary Industry. He said: "Cherry picking what research is presented to legislators is not good science, it is advocacy driven by agendas. The foxes are in charge of the hen house."

The Labor Party's craven submission to a green agenda is an insult to the memory of Maurice Binstead and all who fought to defend Australian freedoms. Our ancestors fought to protect the rule of law and property rights.

Now Labor, in an unholy alliance with the Greens, is stealing people's land and riding roughshod over the Australian principle of a fair go.

Senator Matt Canavan is the Minister for Resources and Northern Australia.