

**FOOTE FAMILY — MEEKATHARRA**

*Statement*

**HON NEIL THOMSON (Mining and Pastoral)** [5.32 pm]: I am probably doing something a little unusual in the sense that I would not normally advocate in this way, as I think the best pathway to support two constituents is obviously to write to the Minister for Lands. Because of the urgency of the matter for the affected family, I am making these comments in Parliament, which I address primarily to the Minister for Lands. I will be following up this speech with a letter to the Minister for Lands. I do so in good faith, and in the hope that staff from the office of the Minister for Lands are watching.

As I said, this is a matter of urgency. It relates to an elderly couple who live in the Shire of Meekatharra. The Foote family has lived there for some time. They occupy a lease. They have asked me to speak. They have sought assistance in the last few days as they have been quite anxious about the issue. They sought my representation to the minister. I hope the minister takes it in good faith because it is something that has touched my heart. I understand that this issue has been going on for some time, with negotiations through the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage. I have spent some time in iterations of that department—the Department of Lands, and later the Department of Planning. I know how complex land matters are. I certainly do not want to see people unduly penalised because bureaucratic processes may not have been followed to the letter. That might be an issue that lies with the department, or sometimes it is a challenge for landholders who have to deal with the complexities of our crown land system, which is extraordinarily complex. This is a big issue.

I am going to raise this issue. In the next few days, I will be asking the minister to look into this case specifically, because, from what I have been told, this elderly couple have been told that they have to vacate their property by 28 February. I find that situation heartbreaking.

As I have said, I will not claim to know all the history, but I certainly know from my many years in the public service that when situations like this come up, often there can be a process by which the considerations or deliberations can be paused. I believe that the family is seeking an extension of their lease on the property in which they reside. I put it to the minister to please consider any means possible within the legal framework. I know the minister has considerable powers, such as even granting a licence to occupy, which might be another option. I say that without prejudice. The outcome that I am seeking is that this family will be able to continue to reside on their property until such time as they can deal with some of the complexities. A lot of information has been provided to me. Some of that is of a technical nature, and I will put that into the letter. It has been claimed that there has been a breakdown in the departmental process over the years of this lease. I am not saying that is the case, but I am asking the minister to look into it.

There have also been some native title negotiations. From what I can gather, there were three different native title groups, and at least two of those have consented to this family's continued occupation, but one group has not come to that point. I also say that without prejudice, but that is what I have been advised.

This can be a complex issue. That applies not just to non-Indigenous people in our regions. In both my public service life and my private sector life as a consultant, I have dealt with a number of quite sad cases. Some traditional owners or Indigenous people who have had longstanding connections with the land have found that the tenure that they have been seeking has not been able to be given, or, in at least one case, has been removed. That has led to quite a sad situation, although, after a lot of perseverance, people have been able to find a way through the bureaucracy of the public service. However, I know of at least half a dozen families who are still seeking tenure on their home. This is something that we should be encouraging. Some of those applications have gone on for five or six years. If members opposite question me on this, I would be more than happy to sit down with them in private and discuss some of those individual cases. Ultimately, my goal is that people are able to find security, which certainly in the regions can be quite difficult, and build their future. I am particularly talking about the pride that people take in homes that they have built out of the earth, through hard struggles. I spoke recently to a senior traditional owner in the Kimberley who has built his own home from mud brick. He is very proud of that home. However, he is still to this day seeking some form of security of tenure over that home. This is something that the government needs to address. If I ever get to be the Minister for Lands, that is something that I will be addressing with great strength. It is particularly pertinent because we will consider the Land and Public Works Legislation Amendment Bill 2022, which has already been read into this place, and we will have that debate. This is very important.

In relation to Mr and Mrs Foote—I believe that is how they would like to be referred to—I ask the Minister for Lands to look at their case to see whether he can find some way in his heart and some way legally to allow that family to retain occupancy of that site. From what I am told, they have put a lot of hard work into it. They feel connected to the place, and they do not want to leave. I believe they are in their 80s, so it is really important that they can have the quiet enjoyment of that property, at least so they can continue with whatever complex bureaucracy or negotiations that have to be undertaken. I am asking the minister for this. I apologise to the minister for doing it this way.

I genuinely do this because the matter has come to my attention in the last few days. I had heard about it some time ago. Although there were assurances that things were underway to deal with the matter, this week a particularly strong representation was made to my office. I thank my staff for dealing with the matter and working with the constituents. It is not coming within the spirit of partisanship, but I ask Minister Carey to please look at the matter and see whether we can get a good outcome together on this issue. I would be very grateful on behalf of the family.

*House adjourned at 5.43 pm*

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