



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**THE SENATE**

**PROOF**

**QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE**

**Queensland: Bimblebox Nature Refuge**

**QUESTION**

**Thursday, 22 March 2012**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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## QUESTION

**Date** Thursday, 22 March 2012  
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**Questioner** Waters, Sen Larissa  
**Speaker**

**Source** Senate  
**Proof** Yes  
**Responder** Conroy, Sen Stephen  
**Question No.**

### Queensland: Bimblebox Nature Refuge

Queensland: Bimblebox Nature Refuge

**Senator WATERS** (Queensland) (14:19): My question is to the Minister representing the Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Senator Conroy. Bimblebox Nature Refuge is an 8,000-hectare privately owned wilderness—the last remaining large wilderness in the Galilee Basin. It has exceptional environmental values and is home to many threatened species. In August 2000 the federal government used over \$300,000 of taxpayers' money to partly fund its purchase and inclusion in the Nation Reserve System. That inclusion gives it no protection from mining and under Labor state government laws it can also be mined. Clive Palmer wants to mine it. His aptly named 'China First' mine—

**Senator CHRIS EVANS:** Mr President, on a point of order, I think at the start of the senator's question either the mike was not on or whatever else, but we could not hear the project she referred to. So I wonder for the sake of the minister whether she could at least refer us to the first part of the question. That would assist Senator Conroy in answering.

The PRESIDENT: Senator Waters, you might start again so that the question can be heard, if that first part is essential to the question.

**Senator WATERS:** Bimblebox Nature Refuge is an 8,000-hectare privately owned wilderness—the last remaining wilderness in the Galilee Basin. It has exceptional environmental values and is home to many threatened species. In August 2000 the federal government used over \$300,000 of taxpayers' money to partly fund its purchase and inclusion in the National Research System. That inclusion gives it no protection from mining. Under Labor state government laws it can also be mined. Clive Palmer wants to mine it. His aptly named 'China First' mine would turn half of Bimblebox into an open-cut coalmine and the other half into an underground coalmine to export 40 million tonnes of coal to China. Does the federal government still agree that Bimblebox is an area of high conservation value?

**Senator CONROY** (Victoria—Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital

Economy, Deputy Leader of the Government in the Senate and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on Digital Productivity) (14:21): Unfortunately, I do not have a brief on the particular project you are talking about, Senator Waters. I appreciate the Queensland election is on and we should all know every project in Queensland, but I am not in a position where I can add a lot more at this stage.

**Senator WATERS** (Queensland) (14:22): Mr President, I ask that the minister take that first question on notice and I ask a supplementary question. The LNP have responded to a survey from Lock the Gate, saying that in government they will not allow mining in areas of high conservation value. Nature refuges are, by legal definition, areas of high conservation value, and yet their biggest donor wants to destroy this nature refuge. Does the government believe that the LNP, under their own commitment, should stop Clive Palmer mining this nature refuge, and will this in fact be the first test of how much influence Clive Palmer has over the LNP?

The PRESIDENT: The question is clearly not in order. It is asking the minister for an expression of opinion about another party's policy but not even in the federal jurisdiction. In fairness to you, Senator Waters, I have given people in such circumstances before the opportunity to rephrase their question to make it in order, so I am giving you that opportunity now to put the question in order.

**Senator Bob Brown:** Mr President, I rise on a point of order. The first part of that question was totally in order. It did ask about Commonwealth government action. The second part you may rule on. The first part is in order and I ask you to rule that way.

The PRESIDENT: I have given Senator Waters the opportunity to rephrase the question to make the question in order.

**Senator WATERS:** Thank you, Mr President. I shall rephrase it. If the LNP government breaks its recent promise and bows to its donor Clive Palmer's interests, allowing him to mine Bimblebox, what will the federal

Honourable senators interjecting—

The PRESIDENT: Order! The senator is entitled to be heard in silence. I need to hear the question.

**Senator WATERS:** If the LNP government breaks its recent promise—the future LNP government, the likely LNP government—

**Senator Ian Macdonald:** Mr President, I rise on a point of order. As you well appreciate, you do not need to go further than she has already done: 'If someone does something'—it is purely hypothetical and clearly against the standing orders.

**Senator Bob Brown:** Mr President, I rise on a point of order. Here are the Queensland Nationals and Liberals running for cover. The question is quite clearly: will a future—

Opposition senators interjecting—

**Senator Bob Brown:** Senator Waters has asked the question—

Opposition senators interjecting—

The PRESIDENT: Wait a minute, Senator Brown. On my left! Senator Brown, I do want to hear what you have got to say, but I cannot so long as there is noise on my left.

**Senator Bob Brown:** But they do not, Mr President. The fact is that Senator Waters quite clearly asked about federal government action if that reserve is threatened. It is a valid question.

The PRESIDENT: There is no point of order. I have to hear the question in its totality before making the judgment. I am inviting Senator Waters now to continue with her question.

**Senator WATERS:** I will get to the nub of it. What will the federal government do to protect Bimblebox from Clive Palmer and an LNP government?

**Senator Joyce:** Mr President, I rise on a point of order.

Honourable senators interjecting—

The PRESIDENT: Order! Senator Joyce, like everyone in this chamber, you are entitled to be heard in silence as well. On my right!

**Senator Joyce:** Once more it is a hypothetical. It is on a premise that will probably be the case on Monday, but at this point in time, and for the next couple of days, there is no LNP government in Queensland.

**Senator Bob Brown:** Mr President, I rise on a point of order.

The PRESIDENT: Senator Bob Brown, I am going to allow the question to stand.

**Senator CONROY** (Victoria—Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, Deputy Leader of the Government in the Senate and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on Digital Productivity) (14:27): I thank the senator for her question. I do have some information on the project. On 13 February 2009, Waratah Coal referred a proposal to develop two mines in the Galilee Basin. The proposal is being assessed jointly with the Queensland government. Senator Waters, I certainly share your concerns about the prospect of Clive Palmer determining environmental policy in Queensland, because, as Senator Brandis, Senator Joyce or Senator Cash wing their way over Queensland in Clive Palmer's jet, I am sure they fail to notice those environmental considerations that would be at stake. I am not sure what they serve instead of the champagne and hors d'oeuvres on the Palmer jet, but some of those on the opposite side certainly know, and the prospect of Clive Palmer running Queensland—

The PRESIDENT: Senator Conroy, just address the question.

**Senator CONROY:** is of concern to me also.

**Senator WATERS** (Queensland) (14:28): Mr President, I ask a further supplementary question. How will the government explain to the Australian public why you used their taxes to part purchase this precious area only to stand by while the state Labor government failed to boost state laws to protect nature refuges like Bimblebox from mining? Will the federal government now guarantee the protection of Bimblebox come what may after Saturday?

**Senator CONROY** (Victoria—Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, Deputy Leader of the Government in the Senate and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on Digital Productivity) (14:29): I am not sure if the CIA are involved directly in this particular issue! Others have suggested they are, but I would not want to go there! Certainly, though, that would be of concern!

But this proposal, as I said, is being assessed jointly. This process will ensure that impacts on nationally protected species, including the black-throated finch, are appropriately assessed and protected against. One of the proposed mining areas fully encompasses the Bimblebox Nature Refuge, part of the National Reserve System, and the property was purchased by a group of Central Queensland residents with the support of a \$314,600 grant from the National Heritage Trust from Australian government funding in August 2000.

It would be of significant concern to this government if Clive Palmer and his cohorts in Queensland were in charge of this process. We will be very carefully making sure that all rules and laws are complied with.  
*(Time expired)*