

QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

7 December 2006

Senator MILNE (2.39 p.m.)—My question is to the Minister representing the Prime Minister, Senator Minchin, and it relates to the Prime Minister's 2004 election promise to protect 18,700 hectares of old-growth forest in the Styx and Florentine valleys in Tasmania. In light of the logging operations proceeding there at the moment and the admission by his colleague Senator Abetz, the minister for forests, that not all of the upper Florentine valley was protected as pledged during the 2004 election campaign, will Senator Minchin now admit that he misled the Senate when on 30 March 2006 he said:

It is absolutely outrageous to suggest that the Prime Minister has not honoured his promise. He is honouring his promises to the people of Tasmania in full. This was a major commitment to the people of Tasmania ...

Senator MINCHIN—It is always outrageous to accuse our Prime Minister of breaking his promises. The reason he has been elected so many times is he keeps his promises. That is why he is one of the most successful Prime Ministers in Australian history.

But there are reports I am aware of about this assertion that we have broken a promise to protect 18,700 hectares of old-growth forest in the Styx and Florentine valleys. The Tasmanian community forest agreement increases old-growth protection in Tasmania to over one million hectares, including iconic areas such as the giant trees within the Styx and Florentine valleys. The new reserves have increased the total reserved forest in the Styx to 53 per cent of the valley. Ninety per cent of the upper Florentine valley is either in reserves or unavailable for harvest. In total, an additional 139,500 hectares of forest estate has been protected in reserves, exceeding the election commitment of 125,700 hectares by a total of 13,800 hectares. In addition, up to 45,000 hectares of old-growth forest on private land is expected to be reserved through the new forest conservation fund.

The coupe in question is outside the new reserved areas and will be harvested using non-clearfell methods. Following harvest the coupe will be regenerated to native forest. Three trees in the coupe that were considered too dangerous for workers to safely remove by conventional means were felled using explosives as a preharvesting precaution.

The overall outcome of the new reserved areas is a sensible mix designed to deliver the best protection possible for high-conservation-value forests and for iconic areas such as the tall trees in the Styx. Once again false and baseless accusations of broken promises have been exposed for the fallacies and the lies that they are.

Senator Bon Brown—Mr President, I rise on a point of order.

The PRESIDENT—What is the point of order, Senator?

Senator Bob Brown—The minister used the word 'lies'. I ask you to assess that and see whether it is parliamentary, particularly in view of the point that Senator Abetz made—

The PRESIDENT—There is no point of order. As far as I am aware, the minister just talked about lies in general. He did not accuse anybody of lying.

Senator MILNE—Mr President, I ask a supplementary question. My supplementary question in relation to this matter is firstly to note that Senator Minchin has obviously repudiated his colleague Senator Abetz, who did say that not all the upper Florentine valley was protected, as pledged during the 2004 election. I think it is regrettable that the minister does not apologise for misleading the Senate, which he clearly did. I ask the minister to explain why these huge old-growth trees in the forests in the upper Florentine that the Prime Minister said would be protected are now being blown up using ammonium nitrate. It is a nationally banned substance. It was used in the Bali bombings and is favoured by terrorists. I want to know why these trees are being blown up and why this substance is being used under licence and authorised by the Prime Minister.

Senator MINCHIN—The trouble with the Greens is that they never listen to your answers. They ask these questions and they switch off; they do not listen to the answers. In addition to the answer I gave, let me say that we do care about the workers. We put their lives first. As I said, three trees in that coupe which were considered too dangerous for the workers to safely remove by conventional means were felled by using explosives as a preharvesting precaution, because we do care about the workers.