

QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE: TAKE NOTE OF ANSWERS

Environment: Tasmania

8 December 2006

Senator MILNE Tasmania) (3.45 p.m.)—I move:

That the Senate take note of the answer given by the Minister for Finance and Administration (Senator Minchin) to a question without notice asked by Senator Milne today relating to the Styx and Florentine valleys, Tasmania.

It is very clear that Senator Minchin did mislead the Senate earlier this year when he suggested that it was outrageous to say that the Prime Minister had not honoured his promise to protect forests in the Upper Florentine Valley and the Styx. Senator Abetz, the Minister for Fisheries, Forestry and Conservation, has said that not all the Upper Florentine Valley was protected as pledged during the 2004 election campaign. Senator Minchin's own colleague has revealed that he misled the Senate. I think it is tragic that he was not able or big enough to stand up and say that he had misled the Senate or, alternatively, repudiate Senator Abetz and uphold the Prime Minister's pledge to protect those forests, as was promised.

Of course, nobody can forget Prime Minister Howard in the Albert Hall in Launceston making a big deal out of protecting 18,700 hectares in the Florentine and Styx valleys, and he has not done so. Not only has he not done so but, currently, these ancient trees are being blown up using explosives. Again, the Prime Minister has talked endlessly about terrorism and national security, and now we find these ancient trees are being blown up using ammonium nitrate, which has been banned nationally because it was used in the Bali bombings and is favoured by terrorists. Some industries, however, have been exempted. Clearly, the Prime Minister has agreed to the exemption for the Tasmanian forest industry to use this explosive to blow up ancient trees because they are so huge that they pose a danger to people felling them. What are we doing dynamiting, blowing up old forests in this way? Do you seriously think any old tree that is blown up using ammonium nitrate will be used as sawn timber? Not on your life. It will just be wasted, ruined, whereas it could serve as a very important ecosystem function. And, while Senator Abetz has made a fool of Senator Minchin in this house and has revealed that the Prime Minister did not keep his election pledge, Senator Abetz is going around misleading people on the impact of old-growth forests and the storage of carbon.

New science coming out just in the last couple of weeks has demonstrated that in fact old-growth forests not only store but continue to remove far more carbon from the atmosphere than previously thought, making their preservation, strict protection, with no industrial management, a high priority in carbon trading, tackling global warming and forest conservation. What Senator Abetz is trying to argue is that these old forests, as he calls them, are neutral and that plantations take up carbon at a faster rate because they are young trees and therefore they are better for the environment. He is absolutely wrong on all counts. Yet he calls himself the minister for forests. He should get up to date with the science. He should realise that the soil carbon in these old forests stores huge amounts of carbon and continues to uptake carbon. If he wants to address deforestation and if Australia wants to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions, then the first thing they should do is protect our forests.

The second thing they should do is admit that the Prime Minister has not fulfilled the election promise that he made in 2004. He has not protected 18,700 hectares in the Florentine and the Styx valleys, and he must do so if he is to be taken seriously. The next time he comes to Tasmania he had better have an

explanation as to why Senator Minchin misled the Senate by going out there and saying, 'It's absolutely outrageous to suggest the Prime Minister has not honoured his promise.' He has not honoured his promise. Senator Abetz has admitted he has not honoured his promise; Senator Minchin has misled the Senate in this regard. As if it is not bad enough for biodiversity, with respect to carbon it is a disaster to see these old ancient forests being blown up in this way, using a substance which is a banned substance nationally. I would like to know what measures the Prime Minister has in place to prevent this substance being stolen from forest contractors and Forestry Tasmania and used by terrorists, since it is the weapon of choice of terrorists.

Question agreed to.