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NEWS RELEASE

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QUEEN'S CHAIN STILL AT RISK

The Government's 'hidden agenda' of designing Queens Chain legislation for the benefit of SOE's and the Government's asset sale programme is laid bare, according to the Public Lands Coalition.

This has only just been disclosed by the recent public availability of the amended Conservation Law Reform Bill, as reported back to Parliament on 13 December.

An entirely new disposal clause has been added to the legislation, according to the Coalition. This allows the Minister of Conservation to declare any Crown land not to be subject to any requirement to establish marginal strips. The PLC is deeply troubled by this.

"We believe continuing public access and control over all riparian lands must be assured by the establishment of Queen's Chain on all state-owned lands intended for sale," Coalition spokesperson Mr Bruce Mason said.

According Mr Mason, politicians on both sides of the House have incorrectly claimed that the controversial clauses relating to the Queens Chain have been fixed. Mr Mason said the current version of the Bill fell far short of the Prime Minister's recent assurances that the Government did not intend to restrict public access and that the Government wanted to strengthen the protection of the Queen's Chain.

The amended Bill provides for the Minister of Conservation, on the request of a manager, to close a strip "where closure is necessary in any case to protect any asset. " This very clearly restricts public access, in fact, Mr Mason said, it widens the circumstances under which strips can be closed to public access and use."

"There is no time limit on this and it paves the way for ministers to close marginal strips to protect an SOE's or private entrepreneur's assets or other commercial interests. This totally negates existing public rights of unrestricted access under the Land Act," Mr Mason said.

Another major concern is the proposed ability for private managers to create improvements or assets on the Queen's Chain. This is a form of privatisation which could quickly outweigh the Crown's presumed ownership of the strips, according to Mr Mason. Substantial legal and financial interests will be able to be created, leaving Crown ownership of the land nominal and ineffective for the purposes of ensuring unobstructed public access or conservation, the Coalition believes.

Mr Mason said if the Government really wants to strengthen protection for the Queen's Chain, clauses providing for private managers should be dropped entirely.

This coupled with the Bill's excellent section on purposes for management will definitely give greater protection to the Queens Chain," he said.

The Public Lands Coalition are asking Government to further amend the bill by:

1. Removing all powers of closure to public access.
2. Requiring the establishment of marginal strips when any lands of the Crown are intended for sale.
3. Retaining the Department of Conservation as the manager of marginal strips on behalf of all New Zealanders.

Mr Mason said these three major concerns are central to the basic issues of rights of public access and control over the Queens Chain.

ENDS

Further information: Bruce Mason