



Speech by

JEFF SEENEY

MEMBER FOR CALLIDE

Hansard 22 October 1998

APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL; APPROPRIATION BILL

Committee (Cognate Debate)

Estimates Committee G

Report

Mr SEENEY (Callide—NPA) (4.13 p.m.): I do appreciate the opportunity to comment yet again on the report of an Estimates committee. I regret that I have only five minutes, because there are some very important issues in this portfolio for rural Queensland. In particular, I would like to make some comments about the budgeted expenditure program for the Department of Natural Resources and, for the second time today, I would like to commend the Minister. Some of the answers that he gave, particularly in regard to some of the big issues in the irrigation business—the tradeability of water rights, water pricing, the COAG agreement and that whole issue of full cost pricing—surprised me. I was gratified to hear the Minister's appreciation of these very complex and important issues. Once again, I will be watching closely to ensure that the rhetoric is matched by the action. The Labor Government's record in these areas is not good and I hope that the Minister's rhetoric is matched by some action.

In common with the rest of rural Queensland and the shadow Minister who spoke before me, I am very concerned about the rather obvious lack of commitment to the implementation of the report of the Water Infrastructure Task Force that was set up by the coalition Government. The funding for the construction of Category 1 projects identified in that report was slashed from \$21m to \$7m, and \$7m will not build many projects or provide much in the way of badly needed infrastructure in rural and regional Queensland. It is badly needed to provide the jobs and the economic opportunities that come with irrigated agriculture.

A great example of how important the provision of irrigation infrastructure is can be seen in the small community of Mundubbera in the central Burnett. I invite the Minister to come to Mundubbera and see for himself what small communities can achieve when water is available. Unlike so many other small rural communities, Mundubbera is a growing town. There are new houses, urban land development and new caravan parks, and even a backpackers hostel is currently being built. Real unemployment is almost non-existent in Mundubbera. If people genuinely want to work, they can always get a job in the orchards, in the packing sheds or as a field hand. In fact, there is a shortage of labour, especially to meet seasonal demand. It is a real problem at times and many people travel there to take advantage of the work opportunities in the picking season. That season is extending as the range of crops extends from the traditional citrus out to grapes, mangoes, avocados and a whole range of horticultural crops. All these jobs and these job opportunities are based on the availability of irrigation water. There is a tremendous potential to expand those industries. If the water infrastructure is provided on the Burnett, Auburn and Boyne Rivers, those job opportunities will expand.

The future growth of those industries, both in Mundubbera and right throughout the Burnett Valley, is curtailed—restricted—by the lack of that water storage infrastructure. Therefore, it was particularly disappointing to see that the extension of the Jones Weir at Mundubbera was delayed, awaiting the result of yet another study. The Minister advised the Estimates committee that no projects in the Burnett catchment would proceed until the catchment study and the WAMP study are completed, and that is deplorable. As well as those two major catchment-wide studies that are under way at the moment, each of these projects has been studied individually.

No-one disputes the need for proper planning and studies, but there is a widespread frustration out there in my electorate and out there in rural and regional Queensland that these studies have become just another ongoing excuse not to build anything. No-one—let me repeat: no-one—disputes the need for studies and consultation with the community to minimise the costs both in economic and environmental terms. But in the end we have to make a decision. We are never going to achieve the consensus; we are never going to reach a point at which everybody agrees. Sooner or later we have to make a decision that the costs are worth the development, the jobs and the opportunities that flow from these projects. These projects are worth the small cost, in many instances, that they bring to the environment, and the evidence is there in places such as Mundubbera where these projects have been proceeded with.

If this Government is serious about jobs, if this Minister is serious about his role—and his role is a very big one in producing the jobs and the economic development in rural and regional Queensland—then I strongly urge that the Category 1 projects identified in the Water Infrastructure Task Force be fast-tracked and that a start be made on building some of them.
