



Speech by  
**Hon. BRIAN  
LITTLEPROUD**

**MEMBER FOR WESTERN DOWNS**

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Hansard 8 December 1999

**WATER RESOURCES AMENDMENT BILL**

**Hon. B. G. LITTLEPROUD** (Western Downs—NPA) (11.12 p.m.): In rising to speak to the Water Resources Amendment Bill 1999, I first want to make some comments about the wording of the Minister's second-reading speech. I have read it two or three times and I would have to say that the wording is rather vague and hard to understand. The first sentence states—

"The Water Resources Act 1989 provides for the constitution, by regulation, of a part of Queensland as a water supply area or drainage area."

That is a pretty all-encompassing statement. The Minister then goes on to talk about drainage areas and water boards. There are many of those throughout the State. However, on the second page states—

"A minor amendment is also being made to clarify that, under the transitional provisions of the Water Resources Act 1989, areas—other than irrigation or drainage areas—constituted under a repealed Act are to be treated as water supply areas."

I find that rather hard to understand. I am a bit worried that this legislation is being classified as just a minor amendment. I notice that the Minister is currently not in the Chamber. I am not sure what that sentence means. I do not whether it is trying to be a catch-all put forward in the guise of a minor amendment. So I call upon the Minister to give a better explanation of exactly what is meant by that sentence.

When we debate a Bill such as this, it gives us a great opportunity to talk about the Act itself. Tonight, I want to take the opportunity to do that, because currently a number of issues have been raised in regard to water and its conservation and they need to be discussed. There is an acceptance by the people of Western Downs that a reliable water supply in agriculture means an assured prosperity. It gives farmers more surety of one of their inputs into their farms. That means that farmers are then better able to plan the crops that they will grow, when they can grow them, their planting rate, and what fertilisers they will use and in what quantity. All of those things are variables, but if farmers can nail down exactly how much water they have to use, all of a sudden they can maximise their production by upping the planting rate and making sure that they balance out the nutritional needs of the crop.

The issue of security of water goes beyond affecting crop husbandry; it also affects the marketing side of a farmer's operations. If farmers are assured that they are going to get a crop, they can then go ahead and forward sell the product that they have on a volume basis rather than on a quality basis. Farmers would also be very much aware that they have a consistent product, so in terms of forward selling farmers receive ongoing benefits.

A good example of that is the cotton industry. Currently, it is probably the best-organised primary industry in Queensland. Those cotton farmers who are irrigators have control of their inputs and they are out there forward selling. Although currently there is a real slump in the price of cotton throughout the world, a lot of the cotton growers in the Western Downs had themselves locked into markets three and four years ahead. The downturn that some people who work on the spot market are suffering is not being suffered by those people who have a surety of water supply. That is just a good example of why the conservation and use of impounded water is so important to my part of Queensland.

We are all worried about rural Queensland. The population of rural areas is declining, but productivity is up. It is better than it ever was before. However, owing to that decline in population, we need to create jobs to keep people in those areas. Towns that have an assured water supply, such as Goondiwindi, Dalby, St George, Theodore, Emerald and Ayr are shining examples of prosperity coming when there is an assured water supply.

That brings me to one of the most vexing questions that we still have not solved, and that is water allocations. When this Government first came to power, there was a lot of angst around Queensland because the Minister made a statement that all allocations of water that are currently held by farmers across Queensland are not guaranteed. The only guaranteed allocation will be an allocation given after the WAMP is finished. None of the WAMPs throughout Queensland is finished. So currently many farmers have made large investments by putting in ring tanks and drainage systems, and laser levelling, and they are waiting until the WAMP is issued to know whether, in fact, they are going to keep as much water as they think they will or whether they are going to lose some. Because the Government thinks that it is going to be up for compensation, it has looked for the safe ground. So the Minister has said, "We will only guarantee and pay any compensation on any water allocations that were given out after they have been subject to a WAMP study." That is not fair, and there is uncertainty out there just like there is uncertainty in tree clearing. It has to be fixed up.

The Opposition is the first to agree that there are all sorts of problems, because we need more legislation in terms of water harvesting and how we use water right across the State. Currently, there is too much uncertainty. I think that some of the blame could also be placed on a former Primary Industries Minister when primary industries was a super portfolio, and that was Ed Casey. He went out to places such as St George and sold further allocations out of the river over and above what had already been allocated. Now we have the problem that has been talked about in this House a number of times, most recently by the members of the One Nation Party. They were invited to go out there. They thought that they could solve it all in five minutes. It is not that easy. I can tell members that my experience was that Ed Casey did not do anyone any favours by going out and selling allocations. We cannot guarantee the flows in the Balonne River. Yet Ed Casey was selling something like up to 80% of a pretty good year's flow every year. Then we reach the time when the river does not flow very much, and all of a sudden a farmer does not get the water allocation that he has paid for. So there are enormous problems in that area.

I want to turn now to the problem out there of undeclared streams that is still to be fixed. I know that Governments of both persuasions have been looking at this problem. We have talked to the Minister and he has said that he is going to make a move on this. He promised that he would do that before Christmas. That has not happened yet, but I will explain the situation. The best example of an undeclared stream being exploited is south of St George at Cubbie Station, where about one third of all the water that flows through the Condamine catchment in Queensland is impounded on Cubbie Station. One third of all the water goes into one man's place. He did that because he got in early before it was a declared stream.

However, on the Darling Downs—which is really a big flood plain—there are not many declared watercourses but, as it is a flood plain, there are lots of run-offs. There are low indentations and undeclared streams. In that area, scores and scores of people are keen to get a secure water supply. So they have built ring tanks. It is not uncommon for a farmer to be working on the slope and, realising that a fair bit of water is going past him, digs a big sump and puts a ring tank beside it. It might cover 50, 60, or 70 acres. When the rains come, he pumps like hell out of the sump, fills it up and he has an assured water supply for the next crop. He is going pretty well. He has been to see the bank and he has invested a lot of money. The neighbour upstream says, "By crikey, Joe Bloggs is doing pretty well. This water harvesting looks all right. I'll get into that." He puts a sump in upstream and the bloke downstream cannot make a claim. He can make a bit of a protest and a bit of noise, but that is about all. If the bloke upstream builds a ring tank and a sump, suddenly the bloke downstream does not get as much water as he wants and his investment is at risk. There is an enormous need to look at that situation.

When one flies across the Darling Downs and northern New South Wales, one can see that an enormous amount of private investment has gone into water harvesting across low country flows. I have seen that spread gradually to the Western Downs. I would say that in another 10 years it will spread as far as Roma. All sorts of people will take advantage of water harvesting on their own properties. They may be miles from the Balonne or the Condamine Rivers, but they will harvest the water that flows off the natural run of the country.

It is a pity that the Minister is not in the House, because I want it talk about lack of equity. In my area, the black soil plains is the most fertile country in the district. Fellows who farm that land can make an application to the Department of Natural Resources for the right to put in a ring tank and a sump and they can then water harvest. On the other hand, Canagh Creek is a natural drainage creek. I happen to have a property on that creek. I thought that I would rather have some irrigation beside the

creek because the land there is deep loam, which is ideal for horticulture. I made an application to the Department of Natural Resources, asking for water harvesting rights on the Canagh Creek. They said, "For drought mitigation, you get 10 hectares or 25 acres." That meant that I could irrigate 25 acres. That is not worth looking at in terms of pasture. When I looked at 25 acres of horticultural crop irrigated from the sump, I could not get enough water to look after it. The inequity is that the blokes on the flat country, who have properties that the water runs past, can put in a sump and ring tank and get all the water that they want, but because I want to get some water out of a creek, which is a part of the same drainage system, the department has refused.

About two miles down the road, Canagh Creek turns into Charley Creek, which is one of the major tributaries of the Condamine in the Chinchilla Shire. People who have properties on Charley Creek are able to water harvest. That lack of equity has to be addressed by the Government. People desperately need to get their fair share of the water that either falls on or flows past their properties. If they happen to be on a minor stream they are locked out, but if they on a major stream they are given some sort of a chance. We have to do something about that inequity.

Let us look at the big picture in terms of cross flows. So much water is being captured that the Government needs to realise that any water that does not get into the river reduces the flow of the river. We have to ensure that we have environmental flow. Having been the Minister for Environment, I know about our responsibilities for keeping our rivers alive and healthy. Because of the number of ring tanks in the upper reaches of the Condamine River upstream of Dalby, not much of the water that actually falls on the countryside gets into the river. In the last five years, I could probably count on one hand the number of times that the Condamine River has flowed over the Loudon Weir at Dalby and gone downstream. On the occasions that the Chinchilla water supply has got very low, it has been rescued by the streams in the Chinchilla Shire that flow into the Condamine below Dalby, rather than the water that comes from Warwick and further upstream around Pittsworth. There is a need there. I have spoken to the Minister about the problems and he appreciates them. We have to do something about that.

Currently, my district is going through the WAMP process. An advisory committee has been put together. There is always consultation with local committees. People from the upper parts of the Condamine River have been irrigating for a long time. They are very nicely set up, thank you very much, and they have water allocations. People from the area from St George to Dirranbandi also have water allocations and are doing very nicely. Those people are members of the committee that advises the Minister. In between, from Dalby through to St George, there is a large stretch of river that generates an enormous amount of water. In fact, it is generating more water than ever before because lots of the good farmland, which was melon hole country, has been levelled and cleared. More water is now running off the land rather than soaking into it. We are denied allocations because of the argument that the total catchment of the river is over allocated.

I have been arguing with the Minister about this issue. In private conversations he will nod and say, "You are right, Brian. In terms of equity, you people along that stretch of the river who have undeveloped potential have to get a fair share." However, will he take water off some of the blokes upstream and some of those down near St George to make sure that we get our fair share or will he ignore us? The easy thing to do is to ignore us. If there is to be any fairness in the system, we have a right to develop our potential and use our fair share of the water.

It has been estimated that only 5% of all the water generated within the Chinchilla Shire is impounded. That figure should be anything up to 30%, which is a six-fold increase. That six-fold increase would bring a lot more prosperity to a place like Chinchilla. We desperately want to be like St George, Emerald and Goondiwindi. We have the farming expertise, the fertile soil and the public infrastructure, but there is a problem with the WAMP process.

When the member for Warrego was the Minister, he negotiated with the other States that are tied up in the Murray/Darling system to build three dams, one on the off storage stream at Condamine, the Nangram weir between Condamine and Chinchilla and another weir at Condamine. One of those weirs was only very small. It had been decided that Queensland could go ahead and build those weirs without a WAMP study being undertaken, because they knew all about the flows and so on. There was no need for any more studies about allocations. The water was there and that part of the river needed a better allocation. What happened? When the new Minister came in, he said, "I'm going to go through the WAMP process." I think that that was only because the Government does not want to spend money on rural infrastructure.

The people who represent the irrigators downstream and upstream are doing very nicely thank you very much, and they are frustrating the system. We were promised that the WAMP study would be finished in February 1999, but still it has not been finished. No money was allocated in the last Budget to build the Nangram weir or the Condamine weir. The Minister has his own reasons for slowing down that process and some of the people who already have good allocations have their own reasons for acting as they do. We are victims of all sorts of people.

I have also written to the Minister about the Nangram weir, because it will supplement the Chinchilla Weir. The Nangram weir will cost only about half a million dollars. It is about 10 or 15 kilometres downstream from Chinchilla. Currently, certain people downstream of the Chinchilla Weir have a water allocation. They are entitled to ring up the Department of Natural Resources and say, "We want our allocation released." Say they only want 1,000 megalitres. It would be inefficient to release that much water, so they release something like 100,000 megalitres. There is a lot of soakage as a result and water is wasted. If the Nangram weir is built, water usage will be probably 70%, 80%, 100% or even 200% more efficient.

**Mrs Edmond:** You've put them all to sleep.

**Mr LITTLEPROUD:** No, I have not. I want this on the record because the Minister is not here. He has probably gone to sleep. I am sorry that he is not here to hear my contribution. It is important that the Minister understands that he does not need a WAMP study to give the Nangram weir the go ahead. It will be a more efficient use of the existing water. However, he insists that it all has to be tied up in the WAMP study. I find it absolutely unacceptable that that should be the case.

There has to be an attitudinal change for many people in my part of the world who own small blocks. The member for Warrego talked about the subsidies that are given for building storage away from the river itself. It is all right to have good irrigation beside the river, but lots of farms are not near the river. We initiated a scheme to give farmers a subsidy to build ring tanks, which would allow people to have an assured supply of water so that they could expand into intensive agriculture. It has long been the attitude of people out our way that if they want to expand their farming enterprises, their farms need to become more extensive. A cattleman will buy a second block. A grain farmer will try to buy another block down the road, get bigger gear and become a bigger farmer. They cannot keep on doing that.

An alternative is that people are going to start thinking, "I can be extensive in some of my operations on my property, but there is more of a future if I become intensive on a part of it." If, in fact, they are able to irrigate 100 acres of their thousand acre block and on that hundred acres of irrigation they go into horticulture, they will set up an enterprise that will probably be a lot less expensive to fund. Rather than taking a big bite and borrowing half a million dollars or a million dollars to go out and buy a property, they can gradually ease themselves into a smaller development and get into intensive horticulture, which will give them two industries to service and more assured income for their enterprise.

I was terribly disappointed when the Government of the day walked away from the subsidy of that off-farm storage scheme that we had going because it showed so much potential. I talk to people around the Roma area in particular who I suppose are a generation behind the people in the inner downs in terms of farming and involvement in agriculture. Those people have gone into wheat farming in a big way. I can see that their young sons are going to come back from school or the Dalby Agricultural College or Emerald college full of ideas, having had plenty of training, and say to their dad, "Mate, there is another way you can do it. Give me a hundred acres on the corner here and that water and I will make this place sing."

An attitudinal change has to come through, but it will evolve. Until such time as we are able to overcome some of these administrative problems in relation to overflow regulations, until the Government goes back and starts putting more money into infrastructure and those off-stream storage schemes, it is going to hold back the development of rural Queensland.

The Premier professes that he has a real commitment to his being a Government for all Queenslanders. I can tell him that the people of Western Downs have thought about it long and hard. We do not have many options. We have coal out there, but we are still waiting for approval from the Government to build a powerhouse. The other resource we have is water. We can export coal overseas or generate electricity. That would give us a couple of hundred jobs at least, or we could put water in and let people who have already got the skills out there in agriculture expand on their operations and give them more surety. I have never heard the Government of the day come up with any better ideas in terms of bringing better development to that part of Queensland.

They are the two options. We have talked about them at councils, chambers of commerce and the producer bodies. They are the options we have and, under the Borbidge Government, we were working on how to make those things a reality. Everything stalled in the past two years, and that is a great disappointment to the people of Western Downs.

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