



Speech by

Mr DOUG SLACK

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Hansard 8 December 1999

WATER RESOURCES AMENDMENT BILL

Mr SLACK (Burnett—NPA) (12.12 a.m.): As members would appreciate, water issues are very important to Opposition members, as they should be to the Government. Many members on this side of the House feel very strongly about water because they have had personal involvement in irrigation and because their core constituency basically is the farming community, for which the provision of water or the lack thereof is very important. Other members have mentioned that Australia is not a country that is overly endowed with water and rainfall. It is a dry continent. It does not have snow-fed rivers like many other continents do. Consequently, water storage and water conservation are very important, as is any water Bill that comes before this House.

When one considers the history of water conservation in this State in particular, one can only come to the conclusion that the National Party and the Liberal Party have the runs on the board in relation to the provision of reliable water storage in Queensland. The shadow Minister for Natural Resources spoke about the development of various conservation schemes throughout this State. As members would know, I come from the Bundaberg area. And as the Minister would know, water is particularly important in that area. The lack of water in that area has been quite controversial. For some time, farmers and industry in Bundaberg have been pressing for additional water storage in that area. Unfortunately, to date, that has not been forthcoming.

Today I read a very interesting newspaper article that stated—

"Bundaberg is one of Queensland's most welfare dependent regions with about 56% of the population receiving some form of government handout.

Figures released by Centrelink, based on postcodes, show the Bundaberg region has the highest number of people receiving unemployment benefits in the state.

Bundaberg also recorded high numbers of people receiving pensions, family payments and any form of continuous welfare, coming second only to Toowoomba."

I instance that because, as members would realise from that particular report, the provision of jobs—and this Government likes to talk about jobs, jobs, jobs—is very important for that region. If we are to create jobs in that region, we must have growth. And if we have growth, then we need a reliable supply of quality water.

Members may have read about droughts in that area. At times, the water allocation for farmers in that region has been 20% less than it should be. So members would realise the critical importance of additional water storage and water conservation in that area. I am not saying that, at the same time, we should not use water smarter; because with the dry continent syndrome, we do not have as much water as we would like to have in that area.

I notice that the Minister is asleep. He is not paying attention to one of that region's most important demands. I invited the shadow Minister to visit that area earlier in the year to inspect some of the proposals—

Mr Johnson: I wonder if he will do this during the tree-clearing guidelines debate.

Mr SLACK: Exactly. I think he probably will. I invited the shadow Minister to inspect the proposals for the Bundaberg, Burnett and Isis region. Unfortunately, the Minister was not overly

cooperative at that time. I rang his office to seek assistance from one of his staff to accompany us on the plane as part of the inspection tour, but unfortunately, the Minister refused to give his permission. That did not facilitate a bipartisan approach to the provision of additional water storages in that area.

The people of the Bundaberg, Burnett and Isis area have been very disappointed by this Government's attitude to the raising of the storage capacities of the Bucca Weir, the Walla Weir and the Jones Weir near Mundubbera. All of those particular projects were approved by the former Government. Unfortunately, they have not come to fruition. I know that the Minister will say that the situation with the Walla Weir is relevant to additional environmental studies. However, I do not believe that the same applies to the Bucca Weir.

The required environmental studies have been done, and I understand that money was allocated to help to replenish the underground storages. As part of the rescue package, the Bucca Weir was to be raised with bags to provide additional storage, but that project has come to a dead halt. Some time ago, the Minister gave some assurances in this House about the project going ahead. He claimed that the money had been allocated, but it just had not been identified in the Budget. The reality is that that money is not forthcoming, and nothing seems to be happening to provide that vital additional storage for the Bundaberg area.

Another concern is the provision of an additional major storage on the Burnett catchment. As the Minister is well aware, several sites are being considered. I understand that those sites have been evaluated, and a site for the potential Paradise dam has been identified as the most viable of the three sites in that area. Unfortunately, that whole project seems to be bogged down. It is going nowhere.

I wonder whether the member for Bundaberg is going to speak on this legislation. Publicly, she keeps saying that she supports the provision of additional water storages in her electorate. She even made it the basis of an election promise. But if this Government does not deliver the additional storages that I am talking about, then obviously that will be regarded by people in that area as the member not being able to deliver on a commitment that she made prior to coming into this House, particularly when we tie that to the commitment that was made by the Premier prior to the last election. The Minister will argue that he did not make that commitment, but I have spoken to journalists, canegrowers and vegetable growers.

Mr Sullivan interjected.

Mr SLACK: No, I have spoken to all of those people. All of them have said unequivocally that the Premier made that commitment. He came to Bundaberg. The then Premier, Rob Borbidge, had made a commitment that if all the environmental and economic studies were right and everything stacked up, we would commence construction of that dam. It would have been built.

Mr Sullivan: What did you say about Nita?

Mr SLACK: Nita backed the situation in which we needed—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Reeves): Order! The member will refer to other members by their correct titles.

Mr SLACK: I apologise to the member for Bundaberg.

Mr Johnson interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Reeves): Order! The member for Gregory will interject from his correct seat. I am talking about referring to members by their correct titles.

Mr SLACK: I take your point, Mr Deputy Speaker. Prior to the election, the member for Bundaberg gave commitments relevant to developing water storages on the Burnett system. I am saying that, come the next election, if there has not been sufficient progress in the development of those storages, obviously the people in the area must question the ability of the member for Bundaberg to deliver on what was promised prior to the last election.

I will say the same for the Premier. Let us make no mistake about it: he came to the area and he matched the commitment that was made by the then Premier, Rob Borbidge. The Minister can argue all he likes about that, but I went to the people who were there and asked, "Am I making a mistake? What did he say?" They said, "No, he made the commitment all right."

One of the senior journalists said that the Premier was very cagey to start with. He did not want to make the commitment but, realising that it had been made already by the then Premier, he matched it. The reality is that, sadly, now that Labor is in Government, they do not want to deliver. It is also a very sad comment on the Premier's word and the Minister's word and their commitment to the development of water resources in this State. I am surprised that you can sit over there—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Reeves): Order! I remind the member to speak through the Chair and refer to members by their correct titles.

Mr Welford: They ought to give you a tourist map for Christmas.

Mr SLACK: I am surprised that the Minister for Natural Resources can sit there and make fun of these types of issues that are so important to the people of my area.

A Government member interjected.

Mr SLACK: It is not a joke.

Mr Welford: No sane person would want to listen to you at 20 past 12 in the morning.

Mr SLACK: Sadly, the Minister is the joke in the area, because he goes there and makes all sorts of promises about development and does not deliver on them.

Mr WELFORD: I rise to a point of order. The honourable member is misrepresenting the truth. The reality is that when I go up there and address the WAMP panel—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Reeves): Order! There is no point of order.

Mr WELFORD: They are greatly impressed. They have never had a Natural Resources Minister who has been so honest with them.

Honourable members interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! I am conscious of the time, but I think that it would be much better if we heard the member for Burnett in peace.

Mr SLACK: When the Minister raises these issues and tries to make fun of the representation that is being made by me—

Mr WELFORD: I rise to a point of order. I find that remark offensive and I ask that it be withdrawn. I am not making fun of anything. The fact of the matter is that the member is misrepresenting the truth.

Mr Seeney interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Reeves): Order! The member for Callide will cease interjecting.

Mr WELFORD: When I see the WAMP panels in Bundaberg and the Burnett, they regard me as the most honest Natural Resources Minister ever to address them.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! The member has been asked to withdraw.

Mr SLACK: What am I supposed to withdraw? The fact that the Minister makes fun—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order!

Mr SLACK: I will withdraw.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! The member will resume his speech.

Mr SLACK: Will the Minister deny that, when the shadow Minister came to Bundaberg at my invitation for an inspection of the Burnett-Isis irrigation scheme, he refused to allow a senior officer of the water resources section of the Department of Natural Resources in the area to accompany us to give us an overview of the proposals? Will the Minister deny that when the shadow Minister and I questioned that, and when the journalist questioned your office, an officer of yours denied—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Reeves): Order! I remind the member to speak through the Chair. This is not question time. He will speak through the Chair on Bills.

Mr SLACK: Mr Deputy Speaker, when the shadow Minister visited the Burnett-Isis area, we approached the Minister's office for permission to have a senior person from his department accompany us, all in good faith, to provide an overview of the proposals and inform the shadow Minister of what was happening in relation to water conservation in the area. The Minister refused to supply an officer. When the Minister's office was contacted about this, it was denied that he had been approached for an officer to accompany us on that inspection.

I notice that the Minister does not accept that point. However, I would say that it was very disappointing to me and to the people of the area, including the canegrowers, the vegetable growers and the local authority people who were all part of that visit, because the shadow Minister had a meeting with them. I must admit that they were shocked that the Minister was not prepared to cooperate in any way to allow the shadow Minister to be adequately informed about what was happening in that area.

I will move on from the Bundaberg area to a couple of other major projects within the State where water is very important. I am pleased that the Deputy Premier and Minister for State Development is present in the House. One of the big projects that is being proposed for the State is an inland rail corridor running from the southern States right up through the inland of Queensland and across to Darwin. That will provide a corridor through which produce grown in that area could be exported. I raise this matter because, for it to be a success, we would have to have additional water storages.

From the feedback that has been coming through to the proponents of the inland railway, there is undoubtedly widespread support for the development. However, for it to work, additional water will be needed to grow the crops in the quantities and qualities that are required to supply that railway corridor.

Mr Rowell interjected.

Mr SLACK: That is right. That is essential. I hope that we would have the Minister's support for that. We would like to see some indications of his support for that corridor, as well as the support of the Minister for Natural Resources, through their applications to the Budget Review Committee for additional funding for water storages to facilitate the development of that railway to service inland areas.

As the Minister will appreciate, one of the biggest problems of the inland is not that it does not have the soil or the climate; it is that it does not have the people or the infrastructure to create the wealth that it needs in order to develop. That is one of the reasons that we pushed the Surat/Dawson development and the Nathan dam. They would have provided catalysts for development in those regions, ensured the retention of the population, provided jobs and produced a more decentralised economy within the State. Unless we have a decentralised economy and various regions of the State can produce quality produce for export, a proposal such as that would not have the legs to carry it through, as the Minister well knows. With the dry climate and unreliable rainfall that we have, it would not be a feasible proposition without adequate and properly planned water storages—

Mr Elder: What areas?

Mr SLACK: Right through the west of Queensland. The envisaged rail line would go west of the Great Divide, up through the Hughenden and Richmond areas and across the gulf to Darwin. The Minister knows about it.

Mr Elder: They're talking about coming in at Goondiwindi first, aren't they?

Mr SLACK: They are coming through the area of Goondiwindi and west of the range.

Mr Elder: That's where they're talking about coming in first and branching north from there. I know there's talk about closer areas of contact with the Darling Downs—

Mr SLACK: Whichever way, the people who produce the products would service the railway that will run through to Darwin. From there, the products will be exported to Asia via fast-cat ferries and so on. It is quite feasible. As the Minister would appreciate, the Asian economy is now picking up. If he looks at the projected figures, he will find that the growth in the demand for food in the Asian area will be quite spectacular over the next few years because of the increasing incomes of the people and their capacity to buy better products. Our environment is seen as clean and green.

Time expired.
