



Speech by

Mr DOUG SLACK

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Hansard 9 June 1999

BURNETT WATER STORAGE

Mr SLACK (Burnett—NPA) (5.57 p.m.): I move—

"That this Parliament reaffirms the Premier's public commitment to constructing a major water storage on the Burnett River within five years from the June 1998 state election."

On 11 June 1998, an ambitious Opposition Leader stood in the central Burnett business district of Bundaberg in front of a group of journalists and promised to build a dam on the Burnett River within five years subject to environmental studies. He said that water and the lack of Government action in this area was a symbol of the then Government's dithering. Mr Beattie then went on to tell the waiting throng exactly what the current Government was doing wrong. It appeared to him that the dam evaluation was dragging on because "one consultation process began as the previous one finished". Surely the now Premier would not have made this pledge to the people of Bundaberg without advice that it was feasible, practical and achievable. Some weeks before Mr Beattie's pledge, based on information from the Natural Resources Department and on the coalition's Cabinet position, the then Premier Rob Borbidge had already committed to the five-year plan.

Almost 12 months to the day that Mr Beattie made this promise to the people of Bundaberg and the Burnett, his Government stands condemned. By his own words and by his Government's appalling inaction on this desperately needed project, this Government stands condemned. Last week, the Natural Resources Minister, Rod Welford, visited Bundaberg and admitted that it could take a further 24 months before the department would even identify the best site for the proposed Paradise dam or a major storage on the Burnett River. To keep their promise, that leaves the Government two years to conduct the IAS on the chosen site and actually construct the massive \$247m dam—a construction job that should take two years but could take three years.

Mr Beattie has not only broken his promise to the people of my electorate but also most likely damned to the unemployment scrap heap many hundreds of my constituents and those of Labor member Nita Cunningham. This is from a Premier who talks jobs, jobs, jobs and a 5% employment target! That is another promise to the people of my region that he will break. While the Premier sits in his office and pats himself on the back, one of the shires that will benefit the most from this increased water storage has an unemployment rate approaching 30%. Yes, nearly 30%!

The member for Bundaberg knows how important water is for the future of our area. She claims that she stood for Parliament to get the Paradise dam fast-tracked and to create more jobs which are so desperately needed in our district. She was the Mayor of Bundaberg and she knows just how many industrial projects and job generating businesses have gone begging because of the desperate shortage of water in our area. She must be feeling very embarrassed right now. Instead of accelerating the process, it is going slower than ever. It is a pity that the member for Bundaberg did not know that one can lead a Labor horse to water, but one can never never make it drink—

An Opposition member: Or build a dam.

Mr SLACK:—or build a dam. That is exactly what the coalition Government did with the advanced planning stages of many water storage projects in Queensland such as the Nathan dam, the St Helen's Creek dam near Mackay and the Finch Hatton dam. The coalition Government has led the

Labor Government to water in all of those areas, only to see it evaporate. Labor has put the brakes on every one of those projects and there are many others looking exceedingly shaky.

Under the coalition Government, the engineering and feasibility studies into the prospective dam sites for the lower Burnett River began in earnest. In July 1997, the DNR initiated new aerial photography, field control surveys and the production of updated contour maps of the Paradise dam site. That was a three-month study and it preceded the engagement of a consultant to undertake detailed feasibility studies and a preliminary impact assessment for storage at the Paradise site. By early 1998, assessment work on the prospective sites, including Paradise, Mingo and Kalliwa, had already begun. That included work on the actual proposed height, cost and technical details of the project. We should not forget that a lot of data had been collated during the development of the Burnett/Isis/Bundaberg irrigation scheme which was, after all, designed to include a major lower Burnett water storage project.

More than 18 months of work had already been expended on identifying a dam site when we left office. The Minister, Mr Welford, now expects us to swallow his platitudes that it could take another 24 months. Does he think that we are so gullible? Would any engineering expert think that it was reasonable to take three to four years in total to identify a site? The largest consultant engineering company in Queensland, Sinclair Knight Merz, did not think that that was reasonable. In October 1997 they met with me and the then Natural Resources Minister, Howard Hobbs, to present a detailed planning report indicating how water from Stage 1 of the Paradise dam could be for sale from 2001 and from the completed project in 2002-2003. This was the precursor to the coalition Government bringing forward the DNR scheduled time line on Paradise dam. Today I table the independent advice that shows just how achievable the five-year plan was and still is.

It is not only unreasonable to take more than three years to choose a site; it is also contrary to the advice given to us by the Natural Resources Department and Sinclair Knight Merz. If it was reasonable to take more than three years, would the Minister, Mr Welford, be happy to furnish the Opposition with a copy of the preliminary assessment report on the suitability of the sites, which was due for completion in September last year? Indeed, where is the Minister during this very important debate?

The coalition Government delivered on the Walla Weir and endorsed a \$12.5m water augmentation program that would have raised the three existing weirs at Bucca, Walla and Mundubbera, which would have provided an additional 20,000 megalitres to the Bundaberg area. I note that the weir bags still have not been ordered and that it may be the year 2000 or even 2001 before farmers get any benefit from our 1998 decision.

When Rob Borbidge told the people of Bundaberg that the dam could be delivered within five years, he based his commitment on a full and proper procedure outlined by the DNR, which had the full support of Cabinet. It covered all the environmental bases and was achievable within the five-year time frame. All it would take for the Government to deliver on this promise is to stop dragging its feet on the choice of a site, conduct the IAS in conjunction with the current WAMP, and maintain the level of commitment that we had to a major dam. This would ensure that one consultative process is not begun as another is finishing, which is the approach that this Government has adopted and which is the very approach that Mr Beattie scorned while in Opposition.

I assure the Minister and the member for Bundaberg that the coalition Government had put in place the fast-tracking of all relevant studies and had embarked on the time effective option of doing the WAMP and IAS studies jointly.

Mrs Nita Cunningham: That's rubbish.

Mr SLACK: Minister Welford is being deliberately deceitful on the matter when he refers to the position of the Department of Natural Resources in early 1997, because the goalposts were moved forward after that date. The member for Bundaberg says that that is rubbish. Was she there? Was she in Cabinet? Does she understand it? I do not believe so, otherwise she would not make such comments. I can only emphasise and reiterate that the position was changed to bring forward the construction timetable—a timetable that both Mr Borbidge and Mr Beattie endorsed 12 months ago. The member for Bundaberg has a seat in this Parliament basically as a result of the Premier making that pledge in Bundaberg. She cannot try to duck away from that. It was a major issue in the election of the member to the seat of Bundaberg.

Mr Welford: Tell the truth.

Mr SLACK: That is a good one! The Minister has been very careful in choosing his words. In essence, he is a fraud on this issue. Since the member for Bundaberg has made such a strong stand on water provision, where does she now stand? Is she going to continue to make blind excuses—

Mr WELFORD: I rise to a point of order. I regard the allegation that anything I have said is fraudulent as grossly offensive and I demand that it be withdrawn. The member does not even live in his electorate.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! The member will withdraw.

Mr SLACK: I withdraw if what I said offends the Minister. Will the member for Bundaberg continue to make blind excuses for the Labor Government or will she show some courage and stand up for her electorate? Surely she will vote to accept the motion that this Parliament reaffirms the Premier's public commitment to constructing a major dam on the Burnett River within five years from the June 1998 statement and let the people of Bundaberg be the judges.

Time expired.
