



Speech by

**JEFF SEENEY**

**MEMBER FOR CALLIDE**

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Hansard 8 December 1999

### **WATER RESOURCES AMENDMENT BILL**

**Mr SEENEY** (Callide—NPA) (10.25 p.m.): I am grateful for the opportunity to make a contribution to the consideration of this Water Resources Bill. I cannot help but make the observation that once again we are seeing a piece of legislation that deals with resource management and primary production issues that are important to primary production treated with disdain in this Parliament tonight. Once again we see the Minister responsible treating this sort of legislation as some sort of a joke. We have seen the Minister sit over there for the majority of this debate and bury his head in the paper. He does not even have the good manners to listen. When he does listen, he makes smart alec jokes. He turns the whole thing into some sort of a joke.

It is an indication of the total arrogance that this Minister has for the whole area that is covered by his portfolio. It happens time and time again. I begin my contribution to the consideration of this Bill by restating that any legislation of this type is very important to the people whom I represent and any legislation of this type will be considered properly by the members on this side of the House, unlike the attitude that is taken by the Minister for Natural Resources.

No amendment of the Water Resources Act 1989 can be considered by this House without once again noting the scandalous performance—or lack of performance—of the Minister responsible for the development of Queensland's water resources. In the one and a half years that the Beattie Labor Government has been in power in Queensland, the Minister responsible for water resources development in this State, Minister Welford, has successfully stopped the implementation of the water infrastructure development plan implemented by the previous Government. Among his achievements, he has also thrown the whole irrigation industry into confusion and caused mild panic among holders of water resource licences across the State. He will never be forgiven by those in the irrigation industry for that.

In considering this legislation, the record of the Minister introducing it is important. Nothing constitutes a better illustration of the degree to which this Minister is out of touch with his departmental responsibilities than his opening statement to the Estimates committee. He said—

"The past 15 months have seen significant progress to a more confident and certain future for Queensland ... The budget for my Department of Natural Resources will enable the Government to continue this progress, particularly in rural and regional parts of the State."

Nothing could be further from the truth. How can we not be suspicious of this legislation today when Mr Welford, the Minister introducing it to this House, must surely be living with the fairies? He is certainly totally blind to the realities of the issues in his portfolio area.

Over the past 15 months, rural and regional Queensland have almost totally lost confidence and any certainty they had, and no more so than in the irrigation industry and the management of this State's water resources. Rural and regional Queensland have totally lost confidence after a series of water resource management issues initially caused concern, then alarm and, in some cases, unfortunately, almost panic, as Minister Welford's ideologically driven agenda has become clear to the people it most affects. His handling of the critically important water resource issue to date has been abysmal. He has thrown the developing irrigation industry into disarray and he has caused untold uncertainty. This legislation comes into the House against the background of that performance and against the background of the uncertainty that this Minister has created in his portfolio area. The

uncertainty that the Minister has generated in relation to water allocations/entitlements strikes at the heart of the irrigation industry, and the complete freeze on capital works has destroyed any hope that irrigators had for the future.

This Minister and other members of this Government need to understand how critically important the water allocations and entitlements that this legislation deals with are to irrigators and the irrigation industry. Those entitlements are not only part of the irrigator's capital base; they also determine in a very real way the return that the individual operator is able to generate from that capital base. When the future of those irrigation entitlements and allocations is thrown into doubt, as they have been under this Minister, when the access to the water that those entitlements represent is no longer secure, irrigators have very good reason to panic, and we have very good reason to have grave suspicion about this or any other legislation which seeks to amend the Water Resources Act.

In relation to the critical area of infrastructure development, no amount of political doublespeak from the Minister can hide the facts of his record, which is an important part of the background against which this Bill must be viewed. When this Government was elected 15 months ago, Queensland was on the threshold of a massive water infrastructure building program that had been planned by the coalition Government and which would have established the economic base of many rural communities and many primary industries throughout the State for many years to come. There had been a properly planned and exhaustively researched program to identify the priority projects from all of the possibilities available in regional Queensland. In the 15 months since last June, all of those projects have been effectively stopped or interminably delayed. Many of those water infrastructure projects are in my electorate. I know well the opportunity and hope that they offered to so many communities. I know the hope that those projects offered to so many people. I know, too, the anger and frustration that is developing every day at the interminable delay with regard to those projects.

**Mr Hamill:** You can't count.

**Mr SEENEY:** This legislation is important, because the irrigation schemes and equitable access to irrigation water have clearly been identified by those communities as an effective answer to the declining economic conditions and a necessary prerequisite for many people and communities to move into new intensive, high-value industries. I note the inane interjections of the Treasurer. His record of service to rural Queensland is well documented. We well remember when, as the Minister for Transport, he was hanged in effigy in the main street of Monto.

**Mr HAMILL:** I rise to a point of order. I remember him hanging me in effigy.

**Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms Nelson-Carr):** Order! Is that a point of order?

**Mr HAMILL:** Yes, it is. I was deeply offended by the remark. The fact is that the honourable member cannot count. It has been 18 months since the Beattie Government was elected.

**Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Order! What would the Treasurer like him to withdraw?

**Mr HAMILL:** I find it deeply offensive that he should malign me in such a way in the House.

**Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER:** There is no point of order.

**Mr SEENEY:** The current Treasurer looked a lot better hanged in effigy in the main street of Monto than he does sitting in the Chamber tonight. As I was saying, irrigation water is the great hope for a better future for many rural communities. Where there is water now there is prosperity.

**Mr Welford:** Keep going. No-one is listening to you.

**Mr SEENEY:** For the record, I note the comment of the Minister for Natural Resources, who said "no-one is listening". He does not want to listen. He does not want to know about the hopes of rural Queensland. He never considers the prosperity that water infrastructure brings to rural Queensland. He is off with the fairies—off with the extreme Greens that run the agenda from his office. No wonder he does not want to listen. No wonder every time there is a piece of legislation dealing with resource management issues he sits in this House like some overgrown clown and makes a joke of and belittles these issues that are so important to the people of rural and regional Queensland. They are important to the people I represent. Every time legislation such as this comes into this House, it will be dealt with seriously by me and other members who represent those electorates, irrespective of the stupid, inane attitude of the Minister for Natural Resources.

**Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Order! I remind the member for Callide not to use unparliamentary language.

**Mr SEENEY:** This attempt to amend the Water Resources Act has to be seen against the background of the performance of this Government and its most hopeless Minister. The tragedy of the performance of this do-nothing—

**Mr HAMILL:** I rise to a point of order. I am distressed by the language of the member for Callide. I want to know whether he has reconciled his conflict of interest in this House in relation to matters concerning the meatworks.

**Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Order! There is no point of order. Frivolity such as this does not belong in this Chamber.

**Mr SEENEY:** That is absolutely right. As I said before, the attitude being displayed by Government members is a clear indication of the importance they attach to these issues. We see it every time that this type of legislation is introduced into this House. Every time I get a chance, I will point it out not only in this House but also to the people in rural Queensland—the people to whom these issues are important.

**Mr Welford:** What a man.

**Mr SEENEY:** They are a joke to the Minister for Natural Resources, but they are serious issues for us.

The tragedy of the performance of this do-nothing Government is that it has destroyed any hope that some of those communities have had. They have destroyed the hope that so many people had for a better future. They have taken away the opportunity a whole range of regional and small communities had for their future. The future of those people has been denied to placate an anti-everything ideology that uses an emotive fear campaign and misinformation to promote its narrow, negative agenda.

I have said many times in this House—and we all acknowledge this—that the need for environmental care in the construction of water infrastructure is paramount. We must ensure that the environmental impact of any irrigation project is minimised, but we must also accept that this infrastructure must be built to provide a future for our agricultural industries and the regional communities that depend on those agricultural industries. There are plenty of examples of tremendously successful irrigation areas across the State which make an enormous contribution to the State's economy and which will be impacted sooner or later by the precedents set in this Bill. These successful irrigation areas hardly ever get mentioned when the debate turns to new infrastructure. We never hear the good stories from the Minister for Natural Resources. Tonight we heard the shadow Minister outline in detail just how those benefits have flowed from one particular irrigation infrastructure project in Emerald. But I cannot remember when the Minister for Natural Resources—the Minister now responsible for the State's water resources—made positive comments about this State's irrigation industry. We never hear the good stories from the Minister, just inflated versions of examples of things that can go wrong—more scare tactics and emotive rubbish.

In considering this legislation, we must remember that he and other members of the anti-everything brigade are all too quick to repeatedly point to the mistakes of the Murray-Darling scheme, and some regrettable mistakes were made there in the early days of development. The evidence of that is clear for all to see. In considering any change to the Water Resources Act, we in Queensland need to learn from that history and those mistakes and develop much better irrigation schemes and manage those schemes to ensure that those mistakes are not repeated. We cannot allow the anti-everything brigade to use those mistakes as a convenient excuse never to develop any irrigation infrastructure again. That is the agenda being promoted by the Minister for Natural Resources.

This State could have been well on the way to seeing more success stories like Emerald in central Queensland, which was so well described by the shadow Minister tonight. This State could be well on the way to seeing more success stories like the Burdekin in north Queensland, St George, Dirranbandi in the south west, Mundubbera in the central Burnett or the Mareeba/Dimbulah irrigation scheme in far-forth Queensland. I would be interested to know how many of those schemes the Minister has visited in the time that he has been in that position. How many of those schemes has he taken the trouble to look at to see the positive benefits that flow not only to those communities but also to the whole State?

As we consider this legislation, we must remember that under the stewardship of this Minister nothing positive has happened. The Nathan dam project, which the shadow Minister mentioned, had a huge potential for the whole of central Queensland and a huge potential for the electorate of Callide and yet it, too, was treated as a joke in this Parliament tonight. The Minister made a joke about it. The Nathan dam project is apparently permanently stalled. That is the only fair interpretation to put on the situation. I would be only too happy to be proven wrong. I would be only too happy to see the Nathan dam project proceed.

The Fitzroy River WAMP was due for finalisation last November—12 months ago. The date for its release seems to be always extended further and further and further. The Minister got headlines in the local press in central Queensland a couple of weeks ago with a grand announcement that it was going to be released before Christmas. It is not long until Christmas now. I will be watching closely to see yet another promise broken, to see yet another deadline passed without the WAMP that the people of the Fitzroy Basin have been awaiting for 12 months. Once again, I will be only too pleased to be proven wrong. I will be only too pleased to see that WAMP released before Christmas, but the Government does not have long.

The attitude of the people in the Fitzroy Basin is simply that enough is enough. On their behalf, I again call on the Government to get that project moving. I again call on the Government and the Minister in particular to recognise the need for that infrastructure throughout the whole of central Queensland. In relation to the Burnett River WAMP and the Burnett River projects, it is the same story. The Burnett River WAMP has only just begun. It is many years behind the Fitzroy River, but it will effectively delay any project on that river system for years to come. That will make an absolute fool of the member for Bundaberg, who promised so much to the water users of the Burnett Valley in her bid to win the seat of Bundaberg.

**An Opposition member:** She's a one-termer.

**Mr SEENEY:** Absolutely. I take the interjection. She is a one-termer. Anyone who knows anything about the political situation in that part of Queensland knows it is a pretty safe bet that the member for Bundaberg is a one-termer. The Burnett River WAMP and the attitude of the Minister for Natural Resources will be a major contributor to ensuring that the member for Bundaberg is a one-termer. The people of Bundaberg have not forgotten the promises that were made. They have not forgotten the grinning Premier, with teeth like a picket fence, who went up there and promised them whatever they wanted. They have not got any of it. The WAMP study has not even been done.

Despite the verbose contributions that the Minister has made in this House about the water allocation management planning project and his suggestions that it is going to be sped up and despite the vague promises and the political doublespeak, these studies are still being used as a convenient excuse for the Minister to do nothing. They are still a convenient excuse to delay forever the projects that the people of the Burnett and the people of the Fitzroy so badly want to see come to fruition, and they are projects that we would have delivered. The repeated extension of those studies has become a convenient excuse for this Government to do nothing and to try to justify their do-nothing stance. That is the sort of double play we would do well to remember when we consider this legislation. That is the background against which this legislation has to be viewed.

The irrigation industry in particular and rural Queensland in general needs an honest, fair dinkum commitment from the Government to the development of water infrastructure. We want something more than fancy words and political doublespeak. We know that out there on the ground the process is proceeding at a snail's pace. Rather than tinkering with the Act, as this Bill does, the irrigation industry wants to see some realistic starts made to some of the potential projects across Queensland. It is difficult, and I would suggest very politically dangerous, for any Government to underestimate the growing level of frustration at the deliberate delay and procrastination being presided over by the Minister for Natural Resources.

Rural Queensland has had enough of the Minister's political doublespeak and his cynical manipulation. It is time Minister Welford realised that the management of Queensland's water resources is a critical responsibility of the Beattie Government. It is time that he realised it is a serious issue. It is not a joke. It is time for the Beattie Government to make some decisions and to proceed immediately with a program to provide some much needed water infrastructure for Queensland.

If he wants this Bill to be considered properly, Minister Welford needs to understand that his smart alec, ideologically driven approach is achieving nothing and endearing him to nobody in rural Queensland. If his handling of his responsibilities with respect to the management of Queensland's water resources has been terrible, his handling of the other resource management issues in his portfolio have been even worse. The real tragedy is that he does not realise the extent of the problems that he has caused. It is important for whoever holds the position of the Minister for Natural Resources to have a good working relationship with rural industry and rural Queensland in general. How breathtakingly has this Minister failed. There has never been a Minister that is so mistrusted in rural Queensland than the current Minister for Natural Resources. There has never been a Minister so hated and despised as the current Minister for Natural Resources. In the blind pursuit of his ideological agenda he has taken away any certainty and any hope for the future of so many communities.

Time expired.

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