



Speech by

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WATER RESOURCES AMENDMENT BILL

Dr KINGSTON (Maryborough—IND) (12.42 p.m.): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak about this continental nation of ours and water. We are the only nation in the world to totally occupy a large continent, but this continental nation of ours is the driest continent in the world. In that context, I want to introduce the thought of world responsibility into this debate. Why is Australia targeted by boat people? Sure, they are trying to escape unfortunate political circumstances, but they are also looking for a better lifestyle.

If one works in any country in Asia, one finds that all the people who live at subsistence level regard Australia as a very wealthy country—in fact, paradise. If one works with subsistence farmers, one discovers that they cannot afford to try to maximise crop yields per hectare. Food insecurity on a daily basis makes them risk minimisers. They have to think about food on their plates tomorrow. Try telling a subsistence farmer to eat some of his chickens and not just their eggs as that will cause his chickens to produce more protein for his family per year. Initially, he will think that you are mad to ask him to eat his productive capital reserves.

Currently, partly due to the collapse of the command economies and partly due to globalisation, the worst ever global food security problem is now with us. Food reserves are at an all-time low. Land and water constraints in developing nations and irrigated cropping inefficiency are major hurdles to increased food production in those countries. One might ask: why did the green revolution, which was hailed as the cure for world food insecurity, collapse? It collapsed because it required inputs of improved seeds and fertilisers. It exposed those subsistence farmers to increased expenditure and risk, and they are forced to be risk minimisers. It was an incompatible strategy.

Do we in Australia, living in relative but declining luxury, have any obligation to the millions living within the crippling constraints of a subsistence economy? I think we do, even if our motivation is merely selfish self-defence. Australia is a very old, very weathered, very dry continent with a predominance of weathered, fragile soils. We are also a very urbanised continent wherein most of our population hug the eastern shoreline. But make no mistake, given reliable and adequate water the great majority of our soils are productive.

Debate concerning the correct human stocking rate for Australia has been going on for some years and, currently, the consensus seems to be around 24 million. The World Bank admits that it has always been difficult to justify large dams and irrigation schemes on purely economic terms, but not on social welfare terms. Currently, we are in the midst of an economic rationalist era, so dams and irrigation schemes are less likely to receive official approval.

Currently in Australia, we have less than 100,000 farming families occupying the majority of this vast continent. What do members think the occupants of countries with extreme human population densities of subsistence farmers think? They do not realise that the red centre is very inhospitable. Does this House think that the poorer, less educated populations of the world are going to let us get away with what they see as non-maximal utilisation of our land resource forever? I think not! Their view of Australia is akin to that of Banjo Paterson, who wrote in *Clancy of the Overflow*—

"And the bush has friends to meet him, and their kindly voices greet him
In the murmur of the breezes and the river on its bars,
And he sees the vision splendid of the sunlit plains extended ..."

They have not heard William H. Ogilvie, who wrote—

"My road is fenced with the bleached, white bones
And strewn with the blind, white sand,
Beside me a suffering, dumb world moans
On the breast of a lonely land."

Or Henry Lawson, who wrote—

"Inch by inch with the weary load;
And by the power of the greenhide goad
The distant goal is won."

What they visualise is Henry Vance Palmer's superstitious boyhood recollections of his playground near Bundaberg. He said—

"Well we knew that evil pool, hidden deep in darkest scrub, prickly thorn and poisonous scrub hemmed it round, and foliage cool met and formed a covert high, shutting out the flaming sky."

Currently, all development proposals are subject to rigorous environmental impact considerations. That is what should happen. Peter Christoff, of the Politics Department at the University of Melbourne, was quoted at a conference titled *Water Beyond 2000* convened in Emerald in 1996. It was attended by the then bearded former Minister for Tourism, Small Business and Industry. He said—

"What has been the price of converting nature into future wealth? Why should we care? There is, of course, a fundamentally selfish answer. We depend on biological diversity for food and fibre, medicine and other materials for human use. It provides us with our most basic needs such as clean air and water. In equally important ways nature offers spiritual sustenance."

I do not have a problem with that statement, as it is prefaced by the word "selfish". Such thoughts are a luxury which millions of people in the world cannot afford even as a thought, let alone experience. I invite members to think about the air quality in the cities of India and industrial Russia and industrial China.

The pursuit of biodiversity is justified, but my memory is indelibly imprinted by the experience of taking a member of the Small Carnivore Preservation Society around Laos. She had a book full of beautiful photos of the felines that should have been there. But as we spoke to subsistence farmers in village after village and showed them the photos, she received only one answer: "Gin mot, gin mot", which means, "We've eaten them all already." I ask the House: can we, who get three very good meals a day, criticise those villagers? I gratefully ate uncooked monkey minced by an AK47 on one trip in Laos when we had not had any food for two days.

At the same conference in Emerald, John Rolfe spoke about the diametrically opposed attitudes of the public to water development projects. He spoke very logically about the difficulty of reconciling the extreme views of what he called the "deep greens" with those of the potential consumers. Whilst not degrading the importance of serious environmental considerations, he pointed out that the arguments of the extreme environmental groups do not provide a very realistic blueprint for resource allocations of society. The main power of the environmental groups is to change public opinion rather than to provide alternative decision rationales. As well, the "development at all costs" lobby has little role to play in the overall decision making process. Thanks to both of these groups, there is now a general awareness and sympathy for environmental causes within the general public.

But people tend to structure their preferences for environmental issues in a hierarchical manner. For example, people view Australian environmental issues more intensely than overseas ones because of factors such as familiarity and responsibility. So what if our polluting industries are shifted to India and the inhabitants of India have to put up with the effluent! When people are given enough information, they are willing to make trade-offs with environmental issues. In personal terms this generally means that a loss of environmental assets needs to be compensated by an improvement in income or living conditions. I invite this House to translate that Australian willingness to make trade-offs with the attitude in developing countries.

Respectfully, I suggest that people in developing countries with an annual food deficit regard our underutilisation of our natural resources as being globally irresponsible. In the past, we have undoubtedly made mistakes. Environmental flows have been neglected, fish ladders have been inappropriate for Australian native species, and rivers such as the Dawson have been seriously overcommitted for irrigation. I am speaking from experience regarding this. I did a series of environmental impact studies to protect the Dawson River and other central Queensland rivers from the potential impacts of coalmines and other developments such as the Abbot Point coal loading facility. I have also done fish population and water health studies on every river from Rockhampton to Broome, including the Lake Eyre and Carnarvon systems, and there are causes for concern.

However, leading world scientists are now starting to ask if water should be regarded firstly as a food. They are already saying that water should be regarded as a common asset in the way that the grazing rights to the commons in the old villages existed. Even in my electorate it is becoming increasingly difficult to satisfy the current and future demands on the Mary River. A lot of scattered data on the Mary River exists, and DNR—and I hope the Minister is listening—has told me that currently it is trying to collate the existing data into a readily usable format. Currently CSIRO Land and Water has 98 multidisciplinary scientists eager to come and work on the Mary River. If they can, we will have the data adequate for the making of responsible decisions. Currently we cannot find the funds for that study so we have to continue to remain less than ideally informed.

Mr Pearce: Do you support the WAMP process?

Dr KINGSTON: I do.

The fact that some mistakes have been made is not adequate reason to stall water conservation development, including the WAMP process. We now have a very comprehensive range of decision making tools. These include an optimisation technique for the responsible and equitable use of reservoirs, which is called the stochastic dynamic programming system. This modelling system can calculate environmental flows, it can calculate loss by evaporation and generally result in responsible development and social use of water.

Environmentally sustainable development is now possible. It is defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This has now been developed into integrated resource management or integrated catchment management. Integrated catchment management is the management of land, water, vegetation and other biological resources on a catchment basis to achieve the sustainable and balanced use of resources. ICM involves the Government and the community working together.

The results of a national review of ICM in Australia revealed some process issues which include lack of coordination, the need to help community catchment groups to mature, confusion between bottom up consultation and community participation and top down policy and Government investment, the lack of integration of economic development with ecological management, and institutional barriers to effective integration.

Previously it has been hard—in fact, impossible—to put a dollar value on the benefits of improving the health of the river system, but lately a growing batch of science, of modelling, has emerged. For instance, in the Mary River we now have the model by which we can put a hard dollar value on the value of clean, healthy estuarine water. Using this model, we can identify the sensitivities and thus prioritise improvement activities. As I see it, most of the technical difficulties to water conservation and, for that matter, irrigation have been removed. We can now make responsible decisions. All we need is the political will.

It is possible to develop a vision splendid for rivers such as the Dawson because we can achieve consensus by utilising our new technologies to develop planning conclusions which are responsible and acceptable to all sectors of the community. In closing, I suggest again that to not develop our water and, thus, our soil resources is now globally irresponsible.
