



Speech by

Mr M. ROWELL

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

Hansard 8 December 1999

WATER RESOURCES AMENDMENT BILL

Mr ROWELL (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (11.52 p.m.): Except for the east coast, Australia is a fairly dry continent for the most part. The strip of some 50 kilometres to 100 kilometres wide along the east coast receives quite a deal of rainfall. Further away from the coast is fairly dry. Further west the land becomes quite arid. Irrigation is seen as a panacea to get around some of the problems of our dry continent. Many speakers before me have talked about dams that have been built over a period of time in Queensland that are really quite important infrastructure for this State.

From those dams flows a great deal of activity. Agriculture is just one of those activities. Another activity is the coalmining industry; I note that the Minister for Mines and Energy is in the House. Power generation is also a major user of water. We are now looking at some power generation systems that will try to reduce that usage of water to enable a more efficient use of that resource. Particularly where water is not readily available, it is quite important that we look at all these aspects. Private enterprise is getting very much involved in this area now. The infrastructure I am talking about that is generated through the provision of water infrastructure is quite important to this State. It brings roads. It brings populations. It brings people into areas who would not normally be there had it not been for a dam.

I do not think this Government will go down in history as the greatest builder of dams. There is certainly some doubt over the Nathan dam, the construction of which was pushed very hard by the coalition when in Government. It was considered to be an extremely important project. The Paradise dam at Bundaberg was another project that a lot of people in the Bundaberg area were scrutinising very closely as a means to enable them to grow irrigated crops that are of high value. To pay for the water used, it is extremely important that these crops produce a good return per hectare.

There are a whole range of ways of irrigating. Some are more efficient than others. Only a few months back I was in Israel, a nation with a very limited water supply that has made very good use of its water. It is very important that we as Australians make use of the water resources we have. We are attempting to do that in every way. The irrigation system being used to water the plant is also the system used to provide nutrient to the plant. That system has to be very efficient. Australia's efficient use of water matches that in many countries in the world.

The actions of the Government have placed a question mark over the construction of a number of dams. The whole process has been slowed down, which will reduce the rate of growth of the State. As I have indicated, without water many areas would not exist in the way that they do at this present time. It is absolutely imperative that, if this State is going to decentralise and if it is to realise a lot of its potential, we have to store water wherever possible. Industries that will probably come on stream are those such as the horticulture, which is now worth something like \$1 billion to the State. There is little question that every time we put a dam in we will have more horticulture grown in that area.

Mr Welford: That assumes there is water.

Mr ROWELL: You're a dill. There is more water able to be used in—

Mr Sullivan: How can you say that?

Mr ROWELL: They are such inane comments. What else can I say? It is important that we build dams to grow high value crops. As I said, horticulture is worth something like \$1 billion.

Mr Welford: How many dams would you like me to build?

Mr ROWELL: We put together a program. We did a lot of assessments. A lot of work has been done on the future locations of dams. In the instance of the Comet dam, we looked at that very closely. It was not a feasible proposition, and it was struck off the books. That will happen from time to time. It is a matter of having to do the assessments, look at the prospects of where the dam is to be put, and consider the impact on the people whose land will be flooded and how to finance construction. A lot of that process was put in place when we were in Government. The Minister and the Government had the opportunity to capitalise on that and go on with a lot of those projects that could be of immense benefit to the State.

I will return to the horticultural industry, which is worth about \$1 billion now. With more water available, I could see it being worth somewhere around \$2 billion to \$3 billion in the very near future. Then of course there is the cotton industry. The broad acre cotton industry is a very big consumer of water. Many areas of the State have benefited greatly from the dams that have been constructed over a period of time.

I turn to the Tinaroo Falls Dam because it is extremely important to the northern part of the State. It was built some time ago. It has been of immense benefit to the area around Mareeba. That dam was built pretty much to provide irrigation for the tobacco industry at the time. With the demise of the tobacco industry in recent times, people who had grown tobacco on their land moved to horticultural industries such as the growing of mangoes, avocados and so on. They have had a great deal of success in growing these crops over the last five to six years. In comparison to the days when tobacco was king on the tablelands, there has been an absolute transformation of what is grown on the tablelands. Tobacco is still grown there, however instability in the industry is causing its demise. Of course, there is little doubt that the massive campaign about the impact the smoking of tobacco has on people has affected the industry.

The sugar industry is now quite important on the tablelands. Three or four years ago the Tinaroo dam was down to about 30% of its capacity. If there is an extremely dry spring and summer and there is substantial usage of water by the sugar industry, that region could well have some difficulties. I know that there has been an intention to divert from the North Johnstone to the Tinaroo dam to bolster the supply of water there so that the value of that storage area can be extended.

There are a few very important issues with the Tinaroo scheme in relation to transferability of water rights. Some of the things mentioned by the shadow Minister are really very important. There are a number of considerations when transferring water rights from one farm to the other. It is quite important to advertise the location of both the buyer and the seller, because that indicates where the water is being taken from and where the water is going. It would be appropriate that an industry body works with DNR on that transfer. There are a number of issues involved with transfer of water rights from one area to another within an irrigation scheme.

If there is an overloading or extended use of a channel, it is highly likely that people on that channel may not get their necessary supplies because the volume of water going down that channel could be inadequate. That is just one of the issues. It is probably not a major consideration, but the fact is that those channels were designed in such a way that they enabled the water to be used for the dedicated areas that the channels went through. I think that is where a local grower arrangement is appropriate. There may need to be three or four growers in that industry body to work with DNR to get a full appreciation of the level of water usage where transfer is occurring.

It is also very important that when an allocation is moved it does not deny an area some prospect of continuing to have water right on it. It may be too dear to supply an end user on a channel at some stage. There are a number of variables. If industry people are involved, both DNR and the industry people get a clear indication of what is actually happening with transferability. I think there also should be an objection process. Those who are concerned about what is happening with the transfer of those water rights should have some way of appealing the exchange that occurs from time to time.

This tablelands region is very substantial. It has had troubles. I know the area quite well because of my history in the tobacco industry. During the time the coalition was in Government it overcame the papaya fruit fly. The Dimbulah/Mareeba area had suffered very badly from the demise of the tobacco industry. People looked at alternative crops such as grapes, peaches, mangos, avocados and so on. They did experience considerable difficulties with the papaya fruit fly. We were very fortunate to get over that particular problem in a short time and people such as the grape growers were able to stay in the industry.

I will move on to drainage issues, which are also mentioned in this Bill. As I said, the east coast of Queensland is quite diverse.

Mr Welford interjected.

Mr ROWELL: The Minister talked about drainage issues and they are referred to in the Bill. They are important, particularly in the area I represent. We have problems with the SIIP package. I

surmise that the Minister is well aware of the issues. In relation to the Riversdale-Murray scheme—we thought all the i's were dotted and the t's were crossed, but it is apparent that that is not the case.

Mr Welford: It has been a difficult one.

Mr ROWELL: It has been difficult, but it is also difficult for those people who are trying to farm in that area. They thought they had some security. This scheme was devised something like six years ago and we are still waiting for things to happen. It is not just in that area. The Loder Creek, Mandam and Ripple Creek areas in the Ingham district are suffering very badly. In the last two years we have experienced extremely wet seasons. The Ingham district has just had the wettest November since 1894. That has had a great impact. We had something like 24 inches in the first 20 days of November and probably as much as 30 inches during the whole of November. That is an extraordinary amount of rainfall. It is the sort of thing that does not happen very often.

Mr Malone: What about the mangroves growing in the drainage ditches?

Mr ROWELL: We will get to that. That is to come. The rainfall has impacted very heavily. We were fortunate this year that the crop was removed before the actual heavy rains fell. Young crops of cane and planted cane that was inundated with water have suffered very severely. There is little doubt that there are some growers in the Taylors Beach area, in the region of the Mandam and Loder Creek scheme, who will find it very difficult to maintain viability because the problems they experienced over the last two years have seen their financial returns depleted severely.

I believe it is extremely important that we get on with the job. The \$19m provided by the State and the \$19m provided by the Federal Government about six years ago, in 1993-94, has been wasted to a large degree by excessive planning. We just cannot keep planning these things to death. It is absolutely imperative that we get on with construction once a plan has been devised.

Of course, there are some issues with mangroves. The Minister would be well aware that I raised the issue of the clearing of mangroves during debate on another Bill. I believe that there is a mechanism there by which we can deal with the acid sulfate soils. Conducting work in those soils is problematic. There is technology to overcome those particular problems—to avoid fish kills and stop the acidification of water that goes out into the sea which could cause difficulties to the fish populations.

Really, the areas we are talking about putting these channels through are very minor in the scheme of activities in that particular region. From time to time those channels do block up with silt. Because of the way they grow, mangroves collect silt. It is probably quite important that they do, but every now and again, as silt builds up, it is important that we be able to clean those channels, canals or whatever we have built so that the drainage schemes that feed into them are working at their optimum level.

Canegrowers have been very responsible about where they are planting crops. We have a code of conduct for planting at certain AHD levels and not clearing land in low areas. Over the past three to four years, some really good codes of practice have been developed, to the extent that mangroves are going to be considered very closely when work needs to be done by the local canegrowers' committees. That is a major step forward.

Getting back to drainage issues—if we cannot ensure that schemes such as the SIIP, for which money was allocated six years ago, are established rapidly, then that really negates the whole purpose for which they were devised, and the ability of people in those areas to maintain their viability is severely impaired. If Governments—of whatever political persuasion—cannot come to terms with what is required there and get on with that vital work, then the money that has been allocated for that purpose probably could be used for some other purpose.

Growers in those areas are particularly upset. They are not sure how long they can stay in the industry. The industry is going through a particularly difficult period because of world prices. Who knows how long it will be before we get out of this trough? It is difficult to cope with the double whammy of low prices and the inability to grow crops. It is only a matter of time before anybody who is trying to work in those areas—which, under normal conditions, are very productive—will go out of business, because those areas are part of the very vital sugar industry.

Time expired.
