



Speech by

**Mr N. ROBERTS**

**MEMBER FOR NUDGE**

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Hansard 11 November 1999

### **ST GEORGE IRRIGATION AREA**

**Mr ROBERTS** (Nudgee—ALP) (6.26 p.m.): Earlier this year I had the opportunity to visit St George as Chairman of the Public Works Committee to inspect the St George irrigation system and also to listen to the views of local irrigators. Tonight I want to make a few comments on some of the issues that arose during that visit and also highlight the obstructionist position that the Federal Government and the National Competition Council appear to be trying to take in scuttling the irrigation works that successive State Governments have proposed for the St George area.

One of the key reasons for proposing additional off-stream storage at St George was to augment the capacity of the Beardmore Dam. It has been widely acknowledged that the original capacity of the dam was underestimated and that this has reduced the reliability of water supply to local irrigators.

It is important to understand that there are generally two categories of farmers who rely, to varying degrees, on water from the St George irrigation area and the Balonne River: the channel farmers who are referred to in this motion and the water harvesters, many of whom are situated on farms downstream from the irrigation system. Of course, many other local grazing interests need an adequate flow of water past their properties. All depend to varying degrees on the reliability of water from this system. One of the more disappointing aspects of the motion of the member for Lockyer is that it appears to take the partisan view that the legitimate needs of the channel farmers predominate and override the legitimate needs of the water harvesters.

During the Public Works Committee inquiry and the public hearings held at St George, it was apparent that this issue has split the St George community. Both the channel farmers and the water harvesters took partisan views that made it extremely difficult to determine the best course of action. In fact, so strong were the differences that the committee stated in its report: "The Committee believes that there is little chance of arriving at a solution acceptable to all groups."

All parties involved in irrigation in the St George area need to understand that Governments are there for all the people. The only acceptable solution at St George, whether it be related to additional off-stream storage or the system of allocating water rights in the irrigation system or the Balonne River, is one that balances the needs of all users. During the Public Works Committee inquiry, there was little evidence of a willingness on either side of this debate to give ground. I encourage them to do so and to work with Government to reach an acceptable outcome for the irrigators in the St George district.

One issue that needs more recognition by the parties is the fact that the Government is currently funding the upgrade of the existing channel system. As has been pointed out by the Minister, \$3.5m is being spent to conduct work such as upgrading pump stations, repairing leaks and increasing the capacity of some channels. These works are bringing enormous benefits to the channel irrigators by significantly improving the efficiency of the water distribution system, and they demonstrate that the Government has a commitment to the people in the St George district.

I wish to make a couple of comments about the National Competition Council. In its second progress report on the State's implementation of National Competition Policy reforms, the National Competition Council commented adversely on the proposed off-stream storage at St George and threatened to withhold millions of dollars in payments to the State Government. To the best of my recollection, this is the second time that the NCC has threatened a State Government on such grounds. That raises the question: who on earth is this body that routinely threatens State Governments and in

this case, the irrigators at St George, with such penalties? Perhaps it is time that the role and powers of that organisation are re-examined, because in this instance I think it has got it wrong on all counts. The National Competition Council argues that the St George project is neither economically or ecologically sustainable and that it does not provide any credible or convincing benefits to the St George community. The position taken by the Public Works Committee, the community of irrigators at St George and successive Governments stands in stark contrast to the National Competition Council's position on that issue.

This motion calls on the Beattie Labor Government to provide the necessary infrastructure for the channel farmers at St George. The member for Lockyer should be focusing his attention on the Federal Government and the National Competition Council, because they are the ones who are now frustrating the delivery of better infrastructure for the St George irrigators.

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