



Speech by

Dr PETER PRENZLER

MEMBER FOR LOCKYER

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ST GEORGE IRRIGATION AREA

Dr PRENZLER (Lockyer—ONP) (6 p.m.): I move—

"That this Parliament calls on the Beattie Labor Government to provide the infrastructure necessary to honour its commitment to the channel farmers of the St George Irrigation Area and to review immediately the current transfer system of water rights."

The St George irrigation scheme was developed to provide a boost to the regional economy by ensuring a water supply for farming country that had previously been limited by seasonal water availability. The Condamine and Maranoa River systems merge to form the Balonne River in the region of St George in the electorate of Warrego. The Beardmore Dam was built on the Balonne River for the purpose of establishing an irrigation area in the St George region in an effort to provide water resources all year round.

The dam was purpose-built and would have adequately provided enough water for approximately 40 farmers in the St George irrigation area—farmers who paid a high price per acre for their land due to the assured water allocation from the St George irrigation scheme as a result of the construction of the Beardmore Dam.

What has occurred at St George is far from what was intended. It is a disgraceful display of mismanagement, corruption and mateship by the coalition and the Labor Party and has threatened the destruction and closure of previously viable farms. The Beardmore Dam now supplies water to approximately 145 irrigators in the region—105 more than were supplied under the original St George irrigation scheme, with approximately half of those 105 being small farms and the remainder being large flood harvesters.

Those farmers within the St George irrigation scheme paid thousands of dollars per acre for their land in comparison with those outside the scheme area who paid nowhere near the same price per acre. Farmers within the official scheme area are at a direct disadvantage because of the actions of the Department of Natural Resources which has reneged on its obligations to ensure a water supply to these pioneer farmers. This fact alone deserves attention; hence our call for further infrastructure to be built to deal with the increased demand for water in this region.

The idea of a west Beardmore dam has been discussed for many years but has never been acted upon. The land where the dam is supposed to be constructed is currently being used as farming land by farmers in the area. These people are disadvantaged as their previously assured supply of water is not now forthcoming. In some instances, the problem has reached the point at which some farmers are on the brink of extinction due to the lack of water supply. This situation obtains even when sometimes the dam may be full.

The majority of the channel farmers are unable to store large amounts of water in times of flood due to the fact that they hold smaller, more expensive acreages; hence they are totally dependent upon water in public storage for their crops. They have made large scale investments and rely upon healthy and high-yielding crops to survive.

By contrast, flood harvesters who are not within the St George irrigation scheme have large water facilities on their farms and are able to store enough water to operate their farms for years into

the future. Although their capital costs to establish on-farm water storage are relatively high, the water is extremely cheap at \$3.70 per megalitre for the first 500 megalitres. Those farmers pay no more for water in excess of 500 megalitres. This compares with the channel farmers who pay \$22 for every megalitre of water that they use on their properties.

When new water is trapped in the dam, the new water is not allocated to those who require it; instead it is allocated between the channel farmers and the flood harvesters. The end result of this exercise is that the channel farmers, who have been using their entitlements, receive a limited allocation of the new water but not enough to sustain their farms. At the same time, the flood harvesters merely boost their parked water holding.

To give a clearer indication of the results of this childishly ridiculous allocation system, normal water allocation systems would provide 65% of the water required. I might just add that when the dam was first built there was enough water to provide 125% of the allocated water requirements. Whilst many of the large scale flood harvesters could, in theory, receive up to 200% of what they require, the shortfall must be made up somewhere, and it is made up by restricting the channel farmers. Those farmers are currently receiving approximately only 15% of the water they require to irrigate in the dry months. This 15% equates to the equivalent of only one good watering on the farmers' properties and is completely inadequate to water the crops. It will not last the farmers until the beginning of the next wet season. These farmers have only been holding on by a thread and the time will certainly come when these properties will be destroyed because of the lack of water. That could happen this year.

I am sure that this comes as no surprise to either of the major parties in this House, as there is evidence of prior knowledge of this situation. There is also evidence of inaction by the previous Government and the current Labor Government. The way in which this system unfairly disadvantages farmers within the St George irrigation scheme is a disgrace.

I wish to specifically focus on the inequitable and immoral allocation and transfer of water rights. There is no doubt that the way in which this water is allocated is unfairly disadvantaging those whom the scheme was set up to service in the first place. These farmers have been exploited so that National Party mates, specifically, will be well looked after.

One of the great dangers facing our nation is our declining rural population—the population drift to the cities. This is also a symptom of an economy becoming increasingly fragile due to the ongoing drift away from primary production. Here we have a group of farmers who possess that much admired Australian pioneering spirit—farmers with big hearts who are prepared to take the risk of investing a considerable amount of money in the high risk venture of farming. They work hard and they deserve to earn a living from their work.

They were prepared to take those risks after careful consideration of the rules as they applied at the time. The farmers have been severely disadvantaged because Governments from both sides of politics in this State have changed the rules. All Governments have a moral obligation to ensure fair play and to seize every opportunity to promote regional development. The former coalition Government failed on both counts. The present Labor Government is perpetuating the moral dereliction. This dereliction will certainly lead to the destruction of some of these hardworking farming families.
