



Speech by

Hon. RUSSELL COOPER

MEMBER FOR CROWS NEST

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WATER RESOURCES AMENDMENT BILL

Hon. T. R. COOPER (Crows Nest—NPA) (11.45 a.m.): I, too, have pleasure in taking part in this debate on the Water Resources Amendment Bill 1999. The Explanatory Notes state that the Bill provides for the constitution by regulation of a part of Queensland as a water supply or drainage area. It goes on to say that a board for an area may be constituted in respect of works for water conservation, water supply, irrigation, drainage, flood prevention, flood control or the replenishment of underground water supplies, which, of course, means the bores out in western Queensland.

As the Minister would well know, whenever the subject of water is raised it can cause some angst, especially out there in the bush. People have often said to me, especially now that the WAMP system is coming to a head, "We all recognise there is a shortage of water. We all recognise this is a dry continent and we all recognise there is a need to conserve water, to use it smartly and to be smarter and smarter in its use"—and not a lot of it is around. We know that during flood times, that is not the norm, that it is only occasional.

Basically we live in pretty dry times. We have an abundance of water in certain areas of the nation, be it up there in the Ord River, as has been mentioned, and northern Queensland. I know that there is always a shortage in some areas. When we talk with people, they will tell us that they have a supply of sorts; some have more than others. However, they say that wars will be fought over water before we are finished. It is not an easy position for anyone to be in as far as dealing with water is concerned. I think we all recognise that something has to be done. The knowledge and expertise of people who have been involved in it for generations have to be taken into account. I do believe that, if the Government appeals to the practicalities and commonsense of people, it will get a fair outcome, even though it will be difficult. If the Government imposes things on people, it will get trouble, and that is the last thing we want.

A lot of people have spent a lot of money either in putting down bores for stock purposes or for conservation of water for production, be it cotton or other such crops. I have just come back from the Dirranbandi area and the Ord River. I have seen a lot of water around and I have witnessed the expense that people have gone to in order to provide for themselves and ensure that they have water security, which is what people want. That means everything to someone producing a crop. It is all very well to get it planted, but they want to make sure that it can be harvested at the end of the day. If they do not have security of water supply, they will be on a losing streak, and we understand that.

I have seen many people go to a lot of expense in water harvesting, and we have to commend them. It is an unbelievable thing, particularly in the town of Dirranbandi. The Minister might have been out to Dirranbandi and St George. Dirranbandi was dead as a wool town five years ago. It was all but deserted. I went back out there recently and found that there is so much employment around that there is no way that someone could get a house out there. House values, for heaven's sake, have risen through the roof. Private enterprise people out there who once upon a time employed no-one except themselves and their wife and kids are now employing up to 150 people. It is quite extraordinary, but it is good. It shows that it can be done, but it is all done because of water. The fact is that they have harvested water, and they have harvested it well.

I have previously mentioned Cubbie Station and Des Stevenson and John Grabbe out there who sometimes have suffered a considerable degree of criticism for taking a lot of water. But all they

are doing is harvesting water when it is around. They are using pumps for sure, but they are also using diversion of water that has run off and they are putting it to very, very good use. Cubbie Station has 30,000-odd hectares of cotton. That is big time. The employment that that generates is phenomenal. Other smaller places are still producing highly, because they have water security.

I have always dreamt about visiting the Ord. One hears about it and reads about it, but to go there and see the dam, Lake Argyle—

Mr Purcell: You'll have time shortly.

Mr COOPER: I have just had time. I have just been over. I was there in June and July. I had 14 days. That was paid for by me, too. The experience was something else. It was great to see what can be done. Honourable members would be aware that Lake Argyle has a water capacity of about 17 Sydney Harbours. When it is full—and it is rare that it is full—it has a water capacity of up to 54 Sydney Harbours.

Many industries—the gas and oil industries and others—are piping their product all around the country. That can be done with water. Straightaway people will say that that would be too expensive. Everything is always too expensive. That is why those projects are not started. The sums can be done and the load can be shared with the Federal Government, the State Governments, local governments and the producers. Producers are always prepared to chip in, but they cannot be expected to pay for the lot as the end users. This is a water usage issue. If water is in a different part of the nation, then we have to go and get it and bring it across. Plans for pipelines of that dimension do exist. However, everything is based on cost and people will say that the cost is prohibitive. I do not believe that it is. I believe that if one has vision, one can make things happen. It is my belief that if the Israelis had this country, the Simpson Desert would be under broccoli cultivation and just about every other crop one can think of. We do not have the same vision in Australia that the Israelis have shown. Nevertheless, they have shown that it can be done. They use their water smartly. Every drop is precious, and every drop is used to great effect. We must develop to that degree if we are to make use of the water that we have. I believe that is happening, but it has to be progressed and expedited. Most people I know—and especially those in the bush—do not leave taps dripping. I for one make a special effort to turn taps off completely. We have been taught that from a very young age. A lot of the bathwater was tipped onto the vegetable patch and so on. Some people have been properly trained to look after water.

The member for Gympie mentioned renewable water and Luggage Point, where 160,000 megalitres a year go into Moreton Bay. That sewage is treated to a certain degree. It can be treated to a greater degree and taken to the Lockyer area—where the farmers would have great use for it—and then up to the downs. They are ready and waiting for it. They are prepared to pay for it, as long as assistance is provided from the taxpayer. The taxpayer would receive benefit from greater returns, security of supply, greater productivity, employment and so on. That is a project on which we must focus. Sometimes it is hard to get those projects off the ground. Once they are off the ground, we look back and say that it was worth while.

I know that the Snowy Mountains Scheme is currently experiencing some problems. It must be remembered that we have come through a long, dry period from 1991—when I first went to the downs—until just recently. It has been one long drought. That is most unusual. Those people are not used to that. It shows it can happen. When it happens, that is when the water supplies are tested. That has affected most of eastern Australia, the Snowy Mountains Scheme, the Murray River and the Murray-Darling Basin. One day they will get a flush through. However, we have to learn the lessons of the past. The Snowy Mountains Scheme demonstrated a lot of vision by the Government of the day and produced an extraordinary result. The unfortunate aspect is that the vision stopped there. The Snowy Mountains Authority should have said to those involved in the scheme, "You have finished that project. Now we can move you on and take you over to the Ord and you can do a scheme there and bring water back over to the east where it is needed." That could and should have been done. There are always visionary schemes that can enhance nations and give them pride.

I hope the Melbourne to Darwin railway scheme that Everal Compton is involved in goes ahead. I believe sincerely that it will. All the towns along that route will benefit. The line will shift freight from Melbourne and all points along the route to Darwin and out then to South-East Asia. That project would have a phenomenal effect on those towns, just as the water has done for Dirranbandi. That project would make a phenomenal difference. It will re-ignite rural and regional Australia. People who have such vision should be commended and supported.

The pipeline from Lake Wivenhoe to Atkinson Dam in the Lockyer Valley/Brisbane Valley region does not hold a lot of water. That region has 150 irrigators who do not have water supply security. When this Government was first elected, I raised with it the proposed pipeline. When we were in Government, we did a feasibility study on moving the pipeline from Lake Wivenhoe to Atkinson Dam to give those 150 irrigators, the Buaraba Creek Landcare group, security of supply. It is not a costly exercise. All aspects have been costed. That would enhance security. It is not expansion; it is providing

water supply security. The project would ensure productivity. The Lockyer Valley/Brisbane Valley region is extremely productive and needs to be looked after.

Another water supply region that I have had a fair bit to do with is the Great Artesian Basin. That basin should be one of the wonders of the world, because of all it has done for Australia. That very significant water supply was discovered in about the 1850s. We have been using that ever since in the form of bore drains. Bore drains for stock have travelled for thousands of kilometres. It has been realised generally that that was effective at the time and was a good, economical way to get water around properties for watering sheep. It proved to be successful during the good times of the wool industry. They have now fallen on hard times. People have also recognised that the level in the Great Artesian Basin has dropped. That is something that we cannot tolerate any longer. Some time ago a scheme was introduced with the Federal Government, State Government and landowners chipping in certain percentages of the required funding to cap those bores and to utilise polythene pipe. That has been done in some areas.

Mr Welford: It is still going.

Mr COOPER: That is right. The only reason it did not gain momentum is that whoever was in power—whether it be at a State or Federal level—cut the funding, which made it very difficult for that scheme to progress. The scheme is in place and must be progressed. The only way to do that is to expedite that funding, so that we can bring the Great Artesian Basin under control and try to return it to its original level. I first heard of that scheme 15 or more years ago. At that time, the projection was to have the Great Artesian Basin levelled off—not reducing—by the year 2000. That goal has not been reached. In that time, the project was not progressed. The scheme must proceed so we can get that Great Artesian Basin back to a decent level. It is wasteful for its water to go into bore drains. It has served its purpose. We appreciate that. It opened up a large part of Australia for our pastoral industry. It has done its job. Now it is time to get back to again looking after every precious drop.

I pay credit to Greg Banff in the Brisbane Valley/Lockyer Valley area, because he is the one who has been progressing the concept of the water pipeline from Lake Wivenhoe to Atkinson Dam. Recently I have taken that up again with the Deputy Premier. I believe that if one continues to be persistent and demonstrates that the plans that are being put forward are sensible and wise, one will get there eventually. It does take time to get those projects going. However, that project is essential for the future, because those people must have security of water supply.

I want to refer to the involvement of private enterprise. All these things do not have to be undertaken by Government, but sometimes Government has to show a lead. Private enterprise needs to be encouraged to take an interest in the provision of irrigation schemes, water supply schemes and conservation schemes. Once the schemes are up and running the productivity aspect will take care of itself. I know the member for Keppel had a lot of experience with a dam at—what is it?

Mr Lester: Fairbairn Dam.

Mr COOPER: Fairbairn Dam, yes. I have been there quite often. That is a classic example of what can be done in a region.

Mr Lester: It cost \$23m.

Mr COOPER: That's right.

Mr Lester: It generates about \$600m by way of revenue.

Mr COOPER: Revenue and taxation. It was back in the 1970s, was it not?

Mr Lester: It was opened in 1972.

Mr COOPER: That's right. That demonstrates what can happen when money is well spent. The member for Keppel is steeped in the knowledge of the productivity that resulted from that project. The investment in the Fairbairn Dam has been repaid over and over again.

Mr Lester: And it has only got three times the water of Sydney Harbour. Compare that with other dams.

Mr COOPER: The Ord River and so on, yes. That shows that it can be done. We cannot grow as a nation without water. We need to progress the Nathan dam and other dams in order to ensure our future. That is our job as parliamentarians. We must ensure that the WAMPs and the necessary environmental impact studies are carried out correctly. We must proceed with these projects. The Federal Government is based in Canberra and we have the Sydney and Melbourne axis. Things seem to be okay in that area, but the rest of the nation, apart from the north-west, is dry. The country's future cannot be assured without a good water supply.

Our methods of irrigation have undergone a change. We have all seen instances where, on a hot and windy day—it might be 45 degrees or 46 degrees—people use irrigators while a howling wind is blowing. The water from the spray is blown away and does not hit the ground. That method of irrigation

is not doing any good at all. One would have thought that people would have learned long ago that such methods of irrigation do not work. That simply costs money. Obviously, one has to irrigate at the optimum time in the morning and in the evening.

We have new methods of irrigation where a much smaller amount of water is used. Even in our gardens we should not use sprinklers in the middle of the day, which causes the water to dissipate and be of no use. The new methods of irrigation permit us to use only a small fraction of the amount of water we used in the past. It is vital that we have education, knowledge, expertise and experience in this area, whether we are dealing with tree clearing or water conservation. A lot of people involved in this area have gained expertise over the years and we need to take advantage of their knowledge.

I believe the Minister has received deputations in relation to a dam site on the Fitzroy River near Richmond. I have been to the site. I have also seen what has happened at Dirranbandi. This dam on the Fitzroy River could open up—

Mr Welford: The Flinders.

Mr COOPER: What did I say?

Mr Welford: The Fitzroy.

Mr COOPER: The Minister is right, it is the Flinders River at Richmond. The people involved have undertaken the necessary studies in relation to this project. A dam could open up the whole area.

Mr Lester: The shire council was told by way of a news item on the ABC—

Mr COOPER: What—that it was not proceeding?

Mr Lester: Yes.

Mr COOPER: I think that is a pity because so much work and effort had been put into that project. The hopes of the local people had been raised when they realised what could be done in the area. We have all seen how dry, arid parts of the State can be brought to life with the provision of water. Before one puts in a dam one must ensure that one has a market. It is pointless producing something if it cannot be sold. This is an area where Government and private enterprise should cooperate. It should be possible to say, "We can build a dam. We can be productive. Our crops and horticulture can be sold." Government and private enterprise must work hand in glove. Former pastoralists who have now become farmers have to have a market in which to sell their product. Everyone must be involved in the marketing process, otherwise the whole scheme will fall to the ground.

Such consideration should not deter us from providing water in an endeavour to open up further parts of the State. Whilst our population is growing, the populations of other countries of the world are also growing. We have Indonesia to our near north which has a couple of hundred million people. We also have Japan and all of South-East Asia. With globalisation, it is difficult to gain a return on investment—

Time expired.
