



Speech by

SHAUN NELSON

MEMBER FOR TABLELANDS

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WATER RESOURCES AMENDMENT BILL

Mr NELSON (Tablelands—IND) (12.06 p.m.): I would like to take this opportunity to speak on the Water Resources Amendment Bill. It would be correct to say that 50% of the work in my electorate is involved with water resources. The Mareeba-Dimbulah irrigation area is an immense project. Anyone who has visited the tablelands could not have missed seeing the channels which come out of Lake Tinaroo and feed an irrigation area which I believe is second to none in Australia, and probably in the southern hemisphere, for diversity of crops.

Opposition members have raised a lot of issues in this debate. I have heard some mention of the tablelands and the MDIA. A lot of irrigators in my electorate have told me that they had never seen so many National Party people on the tablelands until they took the opportunity to vote out the last National Party member. The area is now receiving a whole heap of attention. It is quite interesting to watch the long procession of National Party members coming to the tablelands.

However, the issue remains the same. A lot of the problems could have been solved a long time ago. If one talks to water resources officers, one hears mention of the over-allocation of water from Lake Tinaroo or the under-allocation of water from the lake. A lot of people in my area have spoken to the shadow Minister. He did not mention this in his speech, but I know he received quite an ear-bashing about the issues involved. He was told that these problems should have been solved a long time ago.

I would like to take this opportunity to speak about Nullinga dam. We have a burgeoning sugar industry on the tablelands. We have quite a good mill which was built at considerable expense. The mill is expanding its operations all the time and provides a crushing facility to the people on the Atherton Tablelands. It has been made clear to me that we will not be able to increase our sugar production on the tablelands until we have access to further water. As anyone who has been involved with sugar production would know, sugar takes a fair amount of water, especially in the relatively dry climate of Dimbulah and the Arriga plains. A lot of water is required to get a sugar crop started, and a lot of water is required to maintain the crop.

As I said before, depending upon whom one talks to, Tinaroo Falls Dam is sometimes 100% allocated. However, when the Government wants to have a water auction we find that the dam is not 100% allocated. If the Government wants to make a bit of money it seems to be able to find a bit of extra water from time to time. The point is that if the dam is at capacity—which many people have said is the case—we will need a second storage facility. I know that the member for Barron River has made it clear that such a facility is not only necessary for the Atherton Tablelands and the MDIA, but it is highly necessary for the further growth of Cairns.

When I refer to Cairns, I am basically speaking about the area from Gordonvale north to Port Douglas, which is a region experiencing massive growth. I remember standing at the Kuranda Range lookout and seeing Cairns as a tiny spec among the cane fields. Now the view is all city. Cairns has an international airport and its suburbs spread right up into the Redlynch Valley. As its population increases and the water flow down the Barron River decreases because, for example, it is being used on cane farms or mango trees, the two uses will be brought into conflict. I believe the time has come to look at a second water storage facility on the tablelands. My plea to the Labor Government and also the Opposition, which might be back in Government soon—my plea to whoever will be in a position to make

these decisions in the future—is this: put politics and rhetoric aside and think about a second water storage facility.

For a number of reasons, strong consideration should be given to the Nullinga dam. The Nullinga dam would provide a second storage on a second river. It would not be on the Barron River so cross-flow management and so on would not be an issue. That water storage facility would be on the Walsh River. I have a family connection with the Walsh River. Anyone who knows the Walsh River would know that a series of weirs was in place that slowed the flow so that water could be pumped out. Although I have not seen this for myself, I have been told by a reliable source that some of the weirs have disappeared under silt and can no longer be seen. Six of them cannot be accounted for. Someone has been out there digging around looking for them.

The water flow down the Walsh River was very unreliable. In some years there would be a massive downpour in the mountains in my area of the southern tablelands and the Walsh River would have a good flow. However, the river could go dry for years at a time. A storage facility at the top of the Walsh River would provide farmers with the ability to maintain their watering regimes through the dry season. It would also allow Natural Resources to maintain environmental flows down the Walsh River and keep it clean. At the moment, the river has some problems. People in MDIA have told me that there is a problem with the health of that river and the water flowing down it, which is sometimes black and stinking. There are a lot of reasons for that, and I will not get into the small town politics of it.

A water storage facility would give Natural Resources the ability to flush the system from time to time, similar to what is done with the Barron River. Another argument for Nullinga would be that, once Nullinga was providing storage for the MDIA, which I am told can be done through gravity feeding, assets would be able to be freed up. Allocations could be taken up from Nullinga and water from Tinaroo could be freed up to provide water to Cairns, for example, as an emergency facility. For instance, the dam might become contaminated and emergency water might be needed down the Barron River. Tinaroo would be able to be used as a water storage facility to cater for the continuing growth of Cairns.

Another point raised with me concerns the development of the Kuranda Range road to Koah. I do not know whether many honourable members are familiar with the area. I am told that Koah is a growth node. I am sure the member for Mulgrave knows where Koah is. At the moment all there is at Koah is a petrol station. I am told that one day soon 20,000-odd people will be living there. That is all well and good. It will mean that my electorate will get a lot smaller. If it does become a growth node, it will certainly be taking its town water supply out of Tinaroo.

Part of the Kuranda Range road development strategy involves boring a tunnel through the range so as to make way for a wonderful four-lane highway. Part of the consideration and planning for that should include where the water for that town will come from, if it goes ahead. Consideration should also be given to the increased growth of Mareeba resulting from the new road link. If the road distance to Cairns were shortened, people would choose to live a country lifestyle over the hectic cosmopolitan lifestyle of Cairns. Therefore, there would be increased water demand on the whole of the tablelands.

There has been an ongoing struggle in my community over Emerald Creek. The Emerald Creek farmers are known far and wide for their incredible fighting abilities. They are a mob of rabblers. They were the main body that participated in a protest against DNR on the tablelands. The Emerald Creek farmers are a conglomerate of farmers from Emerald Creek, which is a multicultural area. Just as an aside, I note that one of the young players in the Joeys, Wayne Shroj, comes from Emerald Creek. His father, Max Shroj, is a farmer there. I congratulate him on his excellent effort in the soccer recently.

Under the MDIA, a series of concrete channels carries water to farmers. One such channel goes across Emerald Creek. In north Queensland we have dry and wet seasons; we do not have summer, autumn, winter and spring. It is either raining or not raining. And in Malanda and Topaz it is always raining! In the dry season, water is let out of the channel, it flows down Emerald Creek and the farmers pump it out. There have been ongoing problems with the release of water from the channel into Emerald Creek. One of the big problems—and this goes to the heart of the matter—is that in the wet season Emerald Creek has a significant natural flow, because it pours with rain in the mountains that directly feed Emerald Creek and the Barron River. The important point to remember is that, although it is raining in the mountains, it might not be raining on the crops. Anyone who comes from north Queensland would know that the mountains draw in the clouds and empty them. That is why we have rainforests such as Gadgarra.

Mr Pearce: Do you think it's got a bit to do with the humidity?

Mr NELSON: Yes, it does have a bit to do with the high humidity coming out of the rainforest and so on. That is what my teachers told me, anyway.

The point is that it can be raining in the mountains but not on the crops. However, a large body of water flows past them and they are talking about taking advantage of that opportunity water. This issue is raised with me constantly. For example, they might be able to pump from it or divert it to on-

farm storage facilities. They are saying that the large natural flow is a golden opportunity. The wet season is not always predictable. We might get heavy rain in November and then it might be dry for a couple of weeks before the next big drop which continues through to March. There is a golden opportunity for them to top up large on-farm storage facilities or a group facility. For example, the Emerald Creek farmers might allot a block of land for a large storage facility of, say, 100 megalitres. Water from the river could flow into the storage and that opportunity water could then be pumped out.

People making representations to me, not only farmers but people in the know, such as water resource managers, have said that that is a pretty good idea. That is also my belief. We should be looking into whether that is viable and whether it is another way of increasing the overall capacity of the MDIA to provide water. As I said, this is very important. The products that come out of the MDIA—mangoes, lychees, sugarcane and tobacco—generate wealth for Mareeba and the whole Cairns region. During picking season, a lot of people from Cairns take holidays from their normal jobs and pick in Mareeba. As I said, water is a huge issue in my electorate to people such as those in the Upper Barron area, behind Tinaroo dam, and in the Wet Tropics area.

That brings me to the ongoing struggle over WAMP. I hear that this issue has been going on for two years. I have been in Parliament for only 18 months, which means that this started before the Beattie Government came to power. It could have been set up so that it did not stretch on for this long and become an ongoing and laborious process in respect of which there was much uncertainty until it was finalised. In relation to the subject of property rights, I point out that in the near future I will be attending a number of meetings with the TPIF, or the Tablelands Primary Industry Forum, to discuss the whole concept of water ownership and water rights, that is, what is actually owned when a water allocation is paid for and what guarantees there are. I know that this is all tied up with the WAMP process.

For example, the Tinaroo dam fell to 27% capacity. I clearly remember it. An old bridge which used to link Bore Pocket Road with the Gillies Highway had been flooded since the dam was built. The dam was so low that the bridge was visible and we could see where the old town used to be. When the dam dropped to that capacity, the flow-on effects throughout the MDIA were horrific. There was no secondary storage facility. There was argument at that time as to what would happen to the rights over that water. Apparently WAMP was set up to address those sorts of issues. I will be taking an interest in that matter.

The allocation process has also been mentioned. It has been argued that the allocations made at Tinaroo were unfair because established farmers did not get the access to the allocation that they needed at the time. They did not know that there was going to be a water option process in the near future. When the actual process occurred, these farmers bought the water that they needed at the time, and perhaps a little extra, only to learn that if they wanted more water in the future they had to take part in an auction process like everybody else. That auction process basically pits farmer against farmer and drives the price of water through the roof. Let us face it: it is revenue raising.

An important point was made by some members of the Opposition in relation to the cost of dams. I do not have the exact figures to hand, but I think Tinaroo dam cost tens of millions of dollars when it was built in 1952. In today's terms, that is chickenfeed. That dam has well and truly paid for itself. The cost of maintaining that dam should be covered for the next thousand years simply from payments for water allocations and the wealth generated in the community as a result of it. Despite that, one of the main reasons given for raising money from the water option process is to pay for the upkeep of Tinaroo dam.

I know that the member for Barron River, the member for Mulgrave and other members would have had representations made to them about a second storage facility. Most of the Greenies in my electorate can see a definite need for it and they acknowledge that it is not in an environmentally sensitive area. It is about the only area in the region that is not covered by a Wet Tropics management scheme. It is a highly necessary facility for future growth, especially in the sugar industry, which brings me to my next point. As sugar land becomes unavailable on the coast and in the coastal regions, as we are seeing at the moment, that sugar production has to go somewhere. The most convenient place for it to go is, of course, the tablelands. There are thousands of hectares of land in the region designated as farming land which could easily be changed over to sugar production. All that is needed is that water storage facility.

Basically, the whole argument is going to please the environmental lobbies because we are giving them an environmental flow down the Walsh River. We are giving them the opportunity to reclaim coastal land and restore it to its original state. I personally think that coastal land should not be farmed as much as it is because coastal land is a very fragile environment, especially in north Queensland with the Barrier Reef. This storage facility would give the tablelands the ability to sustain growth and to plan adequately for its future role as a major sugar production area.

In summary, tablelanders can see the need to manage their water effectively. They always have. They want to be a part of the consultation process to make sure that things are done properly. I implore the Minister to give consideration to the tablelands region in relation to this issue. He has had his disagreements with me in the past and he has certainly had his disagreements with the tablelands farmers in the past, but they are willing to work with the Government as long as they see that it is a two-way street. The TPIF are going to have a series of meetings to talk about future strategies. I will be attending those meetings, and I will be sure to keep the Minister informed of progress.

I plan to incorporate this in a private member's Bill. Perhaps it will not come to that. Maybe something else can be done about it. It is certainly an issue that needs to be recognised for many reasons, and most of them are non-political. As I have said, I no longer represent a political organisation. I represent the Tablelands Primary Industry Forum, the farmers groups and the people who live on the tablelands, who have raised this issue with me.
