



Speech by

Mr T. MALONE

MEMBER FOR MIRANI

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WATER RESOURCES AMENDMENT BILL

Mr MALONE (Mirani—NPA) (2.37 p.m.): It is with great pleasure that I rise to speak to the Water Resources Amendment Bill. I think we all realise—and previous speakers have stated it quite categorically—that one of the most important things in our life is the quality and quantity of water. It is probably fair to say that in the next few years wars will not necessarily be fought over land or oil; wars will probably be fought over water.

Most people on this side of the House understand the real impact of either too much water or too little water. In terms of irrigation, particularly in areas throughout Queensland that are productive, the quantity and the quality of water go a long way to ensuring that our producers are productive and that the quality of our produce equals the best in the world. Without planning and real investment in water infrastructure, the ability of Australians—and more particularly Queenslanders—to meet the demands of the world market for good produce and products diminishes as we renege on our investment in infrastructure.

I was quite concerned to read the Minister's second-reading speech. I may be jumping to conclusions unnecessarily, but I will read a small part of it—

"A minor amendment is also being made to clarify that, under the transitional provisions of the Water Resources Act 1989, areas—other than irrigation or drainage areas—constituted under a repealed Act are to be treated as water supply areas."

I have some concerns about that. I believe that the definition of a "water supply area" may invoke certain restrictions which did not apply in previous times. It has always been part of the Act. I wonder if this is not the thin end of the wedge. I would like the Minister to explain that. We do not need to have something specified in the Act if we are not familiar with it. The Opposition will be asking questions in that area.

From my observations throughout Queensland and Australia it is clear that areas which contain irrigation schemes are wealth areas. That applies to any area in the country—whether it be the Murrumbidgee irrigation scheme, the Emerald scheme, the Ord River scheme or the Burdekin River scheme. Areas which have good irrigation schemes are successful areas which contain viable industries and producers who are able to compete on an equal footing in world markets. This has a flow-on effect. People who are making money pay taxes to the Commonwealth Government. Some of this taxation money comes to the State Government and is used to provide services for those who are less fortunate. It is a wealth-generating system.

The shadow Minister for Natural Resources spoke about the Fairbairn Dam. He mentioned that that scheme has paid for itself many times over. The taxes which have been generated from that project have been used to provide services in many areas of Queensland, namely roads, schools, police stations, more teachers and more police officers. We have to continue developing irrigation schemes. We must do this in order to support our population and remain on the cutting edge in terms of being a country that is worth living in.

The Burdekin Dam is a good example of what can be done with marginal land. Before the dam was put in place the land around Home Hill and Ayr was a grazing area. Cattle died during droughts and, as a result, the cattle industry almost disappeared. In the Bjelke-Petersen era, the then Premier

was able to convince the Federal Government to invest fairly substantial amounts of money into building the Burdekin Dam. We saw a marvellous transition occur in an area which was basically alluvial flats. The building of the dam and the introduction of the channels opened up a huge area. This is now one of the biggest cane-growing areas in the State. There is always the concern that water will become too expensive when compared with the return farmers receive for their cane. However, if it were not for the water we would not have the cane. Water is an economic incentive for Queensland. It decentralises investment in the State and it produces taxes which keep the State going. Before the Burdekin Dam was put in place, a farmer would be lucky to run two bandicoots per hectare in the area. A farmer would require thousands of hectares in order to make a living. We now have quite a number of families living off farms of 1,000 acres or less under cane. Fuel suppliers and fertiliser suppliers in those areas are also making good money.

A couple of years ago I inspected the Fairbairn Dam. I second the remarks made by the shadow Minister with regard to it. We all heard stories about Australia's citrus industry going down the tube. It is amazing to see the amount of citrus that is now being grown in the Emerald area. The cotton industry is also well established and is a very profitable industry.

The member for Tablelands spoke about the Tinaroo Dam. It is an old dam, but it is still very productive. If it were not for the Tinaroo Dam, the sugar industry would not be so well established in the local area. The sugar mill which has been built on the tablelands is the first sugar mill to be built in Queensland for 75 years. Even though it is a new generation mill and is only producing juice, it still helps to make the area viable. With the downturn in the tobacco industry, the sugar industry must have been a godsend for the local people.

A number of years ago I was fortunate enough to be able to visit the Ord River scheme in Western Australia. I believe it has to be the epitome of irrigation schemes in Australia. It is a dream situation where a very minor wall—one could almost throw a rock across the opening—was put in place. Construction costs were very low. Depending on whose advice one receives, the dam contains either 50 or 100 times more water than Sydney Harbour.

The surrounding country is quite marginal, but much has been achieved since the construction of the dam. The area now has a viable fishing industry and fishermen travel up to 90 kilometres to their favourite fishing spots. Lake Argyle has fish everywhere. There is also a viable tourist industry on the lake. Tourist boats take people on picnics during the day and on moonlight cruises at night. The lake is quite spectacular at night.

Lake Argyle holds back so much water that water is continually being released through the outlet in order to irrigate the Ord River system. A 30 megawatt hydroelectric plant supplies power to the townships and to the Argyle mine. It is amazing that a dam which did not cost too much is able to generate such resources. I am sure we can do the same thing in other areas of the country.

I was disappointed to learn that the State Government had removed the water development incentive project. That project had the potential to allow private enterprise to build dams independent of the Government schemes. Even though the guidelines were fairly strict with regard to the size of the projects involved, a lot of farmers were keen to be involved. I know many farmers who accessed some of the available funds. The incentive was important in that it took the onus from the Government in relation to building major schemes and allowed private enterprise to build their own schemes and, therefore, assist with the sustainability of the sugar industry, the cotton industry and other industries which rely heavily on water.

I think that it is important for any Government to provide incentives. As I said, I am very disappointed that they were removed. I think that there is an opportunity for this Government to look again at some sort of incentive scheme to encourage farmers who have no access to those Government projects to put their own money towards water infrastructure to make sure that not only they themselves but also their whole communities become viable again. We often hear the Premier talk about jobs, jobs, jobs. The only way in which we are going to create jobs is to give some sort of incentives to people so that they are interested in actually creating jobs or becoming viable. Some of our small communities are certainly in need of such incentives.

In my own area, there has been talk of two dams being built, the St Helens dam and the Finch Hatton Gorge dam. Before the last election, there was a commitment by the then Labor Opposition that they would not build the Finch Hatton Gorge dam. Of course, my Labor Party opponent, Barry Gomersall, was quite keen to make sure that people knew that the Labor Government was not going to build the Finch Hatton Gorge dam.

Mr Healy: Which party does the Grasshopper belong to these days?

Mr MALONE: I am not quite sure. I think that he might be out on his own now.

Mr Healy: He was cast out, wasn't he?

Mr MALONE: Possibly cast out, yes. However, I think that he is doing some backflips, so one never knows.

Certainly from an environmental point of view, the Finch Hatton Gorge scheme raised some concerns. However, the reality was that the water in the ponded area is nowhere near the national park. There were a lot of dishonest media reports and, unfortunately, the issue was blown out of all proportion. In terms of the aesthetics of the dam, I think that it would have been quite attractive to have a water catchment below a national park with a road around the edge leading into the national park. At the end of the day, when people thought about the big picture, they realised that it would have been quite suitable.

The beauty about the Finch Hatton Gorge dam proposal is that it is a very sustainable resource. The amount of rain that falls in that region is quite extensive. The fact of the matter is that, within a few years, Mackay City will be running short of water and dams will need to be built in the Pioneer Valley to supply the extra water. The only other dam site that is available in the Pioneer Valley, apart from those two other dam sites, is the Blacks Creek scheme, which is quite an expensive scheme. The cost of water from that scheme would be so prohibitive that it will probably never be built. However, sooner or later—perhaps in about 10 years or 15 years' time—we will need to build another dam somewhere just to supply water to Mackay. Sooner or later, somebody has to make the hard decisions and work out where the next dam is going to be located.

In my electorate, the Connors River dam, which is quite a large project, has been talked about. Most members would have heard of the Connors River. It used to close the old highway from Marlborough through to Mackay for many weeks at a time. The name of the dam site is probably not politically correct; it was called the gin sleep dam site. Now it is called the Connors River dam site. It is an excellent dam site, very similar to the Ord River scheme, but on a smaller scale. It is quite a narrow pass between very high hills. The water would back up for about 100 kilometres. So it is quite a large dam and has the potential to irrigate substantial amounts of land and also provide water to the inland mines of Moranbah and possibly Hail Creek.

Last night, another member referred to the Elliott Channel, which is essential in order for Bowen and the surrounding area to grow. One of Bowen's great assets is its very arable land, but one of its disadvantages is its lack of water. Sooner or later, somebody has to make a decision to get water to Bowen. Whether it is through the Urannah dam up on the Broken River or in the Elliott Channel coming down from the Burdekin, sooner or later somebody has to make a decision to do something so that Bowen can go ahead. We hear some impressive speeches by people about how they are going to make Bowen grow. At the end of the day, unless Bowen gets sustainable water, it will never move ahead.

In the few minutes that I have left, I would like to congratulate the water boards that I have in my electorate. The Pioneer Valley water board, under the chairmanship of Eddie Westcott and deputy Andrew Cappello, have worked hard to ensure that the Teemburra Dam system has gone ahead. They have taken a lot of responsibility. It is one of the first water boards to borrow money to put in infrastructure. They have had a huge amount of problems, and still have. They need extra Government resources to overcome some planning and engineering difficulties—and the term is stuff-ups—because the Natural Resources Department in its engineering plans put together poly pipes that were not up to standard and, when the pressure came on, all the fittings blew out. They have had to change all of those virtually at their own cost. I think some litigation is occurring but, at the end of the day, these guys have had to stick their necks out and work hard to make that happen.

Of course, as I commented last night when speaking to somebody else, the problem with the Eton irrigation scheme is that the bulk water price is increasing and the subsidies that are available are going to impact on the price that is charged to consumers. With the sugar industry going through some tough times, the last thing that we need is for the water price to go up. They are working hard but, unfortunately, there is a lot of uncertainty with the ability of those water boards to deliver. However, I would like to congratulate them on the work that they are doing.

I think that we should link water conservation with incentives. I would be only too happy to work with anybody who could create some sort of incentive for more farmers to get involved in trickle irrigation. We can halve the use of water with trickle irrigation and we can deliver it right to where it is needed. We can make deserts bloom with trickle irrigation. I think that there is a huge opportunity for Governments to get involved and encourage people with more technology and incentives to deliver water right to the plant and make sure that none of it is lost.
