



Speech by

BILL FELDMAN

MEMBER FOR CABOOLTURE

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WATER BILL

Mr FELDMAN (Caboolture—CCAQ) (4.27 p.m.): Some of the previous speakers mentioned the need for an appeal process and compensation. But as some have said, farmers do not want compensation. We have seen that in the dairy industry. We see that now with respect to vegetation management. We have been through that. People out there are scared, and they are scared for very good reason: they have seen Government slowly take over and grab what used to be rightfully theirs.

We heard the honourable member for Keppel speaking about the problems in the Murray-Darling Basin. In respect of the water allocation that we have in Queensland, the southern States are making us pay for the mistakes they made. Hence there is a need for someone to look at exactly how we handle our water and how it is allocated.

I agree with the previous member, who spoke about the reluctance of this Labor Government to go into major dam building programs, which would perhaps provide a better and more equitable way to allocate water to irrigation farmers. It is sad that there is a reluctance on the part of this Labor Government to increase the availability of water.

Water is not just a major resource, but it is a basic resource—the most basic resource for the man on the land and for industry. I think it is a shame that this Bill does not really address a way to allocate water equitably and especially in relation to an appeal process for those who are going to be adversely—and grossly adversely—affected by the way this Bill has been drafted.

I would firstly like to pay a compliment to the Minister for his willingness to recognise and acknowledge the work done by others in this place. His acknowledgment of the work that was undertaken previously by the Honourable Don Neal in initiating change to the water laws is a breath of fresh air. I can only hope that the practice of recognising the work and initiatives of others in this place is continued.

In his second-reading speech on this Bill, the Minister stated that it took less than two hours to read the second-reading speech, adjourn, resume debate and pass the original Bill. Perhaps this is a positive reflection on the people responsible for drafting the original Bill or perhaps it was guillotined and rammed through the Parliament with indecent haste, just as has happened in the past with so much important legislation at the hands of this morally and financially bankrupt Government. Let me suggest to the Minister that to merely read the present Bill in two hours, let alone do anything else, would be quite an achievement. Of course, in this case the Bill has many similarities to the trashy TV soap operas in front of which we can fall asleep throughout large sections of them and miss nothing—a fact that many longer serving members of this House would no doubt appreciate.

I would like to point to a small excerpt from the Explanatory Notes accompanying the Bill. It states—

"Much of the legislation regulating the water industry in Queensland predates the significant changes and institutional reform now occurring."

While the City Country Alliance supports and will support positive and non-detrimental water allocation reforms, we cannot support this Bill. While I do not oppose the positive institutional reform and I recognise and appreciate progress as distinct from change, I must say that if this Bill represents institutional reform, it bears precious little relationship to progress or improvement. Perhaps I am being

a little unfair on the Minister. If the Minister defines progress as moving in a predetermined direction and if his idea of improvement is more to do with improving his Government's chances of avoiding bankruptcy than improving the lot of the community in general, I suppose it is fair to say that the Bill is making significant progress and improvement.

It is certainly improving the Government's position in relation to getting ready for the old one step, two step, three step routine that has been so much a feature of both the Labor and coalition Governments of this State and at the Federal level for many years. They all know what I am talking about, or at least they should. I am talking about step one, which is to claim that there are all sorts of problems with the current system in whatever area they are attacking. Step two is to pretend to sort out the problem by turning the entity and institution upside down and reinventing it as a corporation. Step three is to privatise the whole thing, thereby making a quick buck for the Government of the day with nary a thought for the people who will pay the price for the corruption and the greed for decades to come.

Apart from that type of achievement, this Bill is lacking in solutions. In fact, in a number of places the Bill could be very accurately described as representing movement and colour rather than achievement. One has to question just who the target audience of this piece of long-winded legislation is. Is it the people who are expected to comply with it, is it written for the bureaucracy who are to administer it, or perhaps—and I hardly dare utter these words—could it have been written to satisfy the ravenous hunger of a couple of single interest groups to whom this Government owes some favours? After all, why else would a Premier in his right mind—and I assume for a moment that this one is—force such a divisive piece of legislation on the voters of Queensland so close to an election if it was not to satisfy the demands of a noisy minority to whom he owes his position? Whatever the case, there is no doubt in my mind that it is written by the bureaucracy for the bureaucracy and that the people who use the water, apply for licences and permits and pay for the water are just a few to fetter the process.

In clause 40 of Part 2 of Chapter 2, the Bill states that "the Minister must publish a notice of the Minister's intention to prepare a draft water resource plan for the proposed plan area." The next several pages of the Bill are devoted to giving hapless members of the public the feeling that they actually have some say in the outcome of the plan, but instead it actually results in those who have objections becoming worn out and frustrated long before the bureaucratic nightmare has ended.

The present Bill draws together a number of pieces of legislation that have water as a common element, but in doing so there has been developed legislation that is so convoluted as to be almost meaningless to the general public and to the industry sectors that are to comply with it. In addition, the process involved in applying the requirements are so protracted and at the end of the day so pointless that eventually the price of water for everyone, both city and country alike, will increase for no better reason than to cover the cost of the administration of this bureaucrats' dream.

I am aware, as is every single person present in this Chamber, that skyrocketing administrative costs have a high correlation with Labor Governments. Historically, Labor Governments—and this one is no exception—have great difficulty in hanging on to the Treasury purse strings. They have always been known as big spenders in Government. Unfortunately, their big spending is seldom well directed as it is mainly directed to those areas that are of major concern to the vocal minorities to whom modern-day Labor Governments owe their allegiance and their tenuous grip on the reins of power.

Mr Reynolds: What about a AAA rating?

Mr FELDMAN: That is why Labor Governments seldom last long and cannot balance the books. That is right, Labor Treasurers are notorious for not being able to add or subtract. In fact, in some informed circles numerical ineptitude is considered to be a mandatory qualification for the appointment of Labor Treasurers.

Mr Reynolds: I don't think you understand this Bill.

Mr FELDMAN: It is either that, or they are not strong enough to guard the gates of the Treasury against raids by marauding Ministers desperately trying to suck up to the fringe elements to whom they owe their power.

Mr Reynolds: Who wrote this stuff?

Mr FELDMAN: That is right. I can hear my colleagues over there bleating about how much the truth hurts, but they cannot have it both ways. Either the Treasury is numerically challenged or it is a moral weakling and, of course, I have heard many suggest that it is both. Who am I to argue with such obviously wise people? We know what is happening financially here in this State and it is only a matter of time before it hits the wall.

Getting back to the Bill, it introduces or, rather, further entrenches another highly undesirable trend and that is the process of taking the responsibility for decision making away from elected members and transferring it to the bureaucrats. As I said, it is a most undesirable trend. This type of decision-making process leaves the public with no recourse. The result of this direction in legislative

drafting is a situation in which the Minister and, therefore, the Parliament are cut out of the decision-making loop. The real power and authority is being diverted to the bureaucracy, to career public servants who to a greater and greater extent are being given the power of life and death over whole industry sectors in this State. One is led inexorably to the conclusion that this developing situation is no mere accident.

Honourable members interjected.

Mr FELDMAN: I hear the members over there. They may call me a conspiracy theorist if they wish, but I firmly believe there is a plan to slowly devolve State powers to the bureaucracy and to regional boards with the long-term aim of emasculating State Governments. This simply cannot be allowed to happen. The only protection most Australians have from the excesses of the Federal Government and the United Nations is the constitutional powers that individual State Governments possess. Once those powers are lost or significantly eroded they will never be replaced.

Even as we speak the United Nations is holding what it calls a Millennium Summit in New York. The summit is, in fact, another step towards that one world Government. We sit here discussing the Water Bill and our Prime Minister is in New York making some token noises to the United Nations about interference in Australia's internal affairs while preparing to sign away further slices of our sovereignty to globalists and the United Nations.

For the person who is simply trying to run a farm or a business, the process set out in this legislation will be an excellent example of participant fatigue. The first step in this participant fatigue exercise is to produce a Bill that is 384 pages long; in other words, a Bill that is so longwinded and repetitive that only the most dedicated and legally literate members of the public would be able to look through the morass of gobbledygook that is contained therein. Next, the participant has to deal with the incredibly complex workings of the numerous plans and licences that are required if one is to have a hope of complying with the onerous requirements of the legislation. This could be a wonderful Bill but only for those who wish to become involved and who have little else to do with their life. They could turn it into a lifelong hobby. The unfortunate thing is that a lot of farmers will be affected by this and a lot of farmers will be driven to the wall by it and they are going to have to make a lifelong hobby of delving into it to find exactly how all these things are going to work, especially the WAMPs.

There is certainly enough detail and doubletalk in the Bill to keep the most ardent bush lawyers arguing for years. Of course, the bureaucrats and lawyers will be rubbing their hands together with glee as they prepare to reap the monetary benefits, turning this into yet another industry in its own right. Similarly, anyone who has a single-issue barrow to push will be overjoyed at the potential for obstructionism and litigation contained in this Bill. However, for the average businessperson or farmer who has enough on their plate already, the process established in this Bill will simply be a nightmare.

The precedent for this has already been established. The Australian taxation legislation has become so complicated that people now have to employ experts to have any hope of complying, so much so that many of our taxation experts are dropping out of the system because they cannot interpret the Act with any degree of certainty. And so it will be with this legislation as well. It will result in grossly increased costs for all water users, farmers, industries and householders alike with absolutely no prospect of any benefits, except to those multinational companies poised to exploit tradability components of this Bill. To boot, this Bill should be titled the Water and Taxation Bill 2000, because it has as much to do with taking away rights and increasing charges as it does with water. This Bill is typical of the type of anti-bush, anti-community and pro-fringe lobby group legislation that this Government has become infamous for Australiawide.

In closing, I wish to record my personal abhorrence of the direction in which this Bill is taking the water consumers of Queensland and condemn the misguided Minister who introduced it to this House. We await with some trepidation the amendments to be moved to this Bill. I have not had an opportunity to go through them as yet, and I will look at the amendments that the coalition introduces as well. Of course, that will occur in the Committee stage of the Bill. I will look at what changes can be made to try to make this Bill a little better than it is, because it is no good the way it is.
