



Speech by  
**Hon. BRIAN  
LITTLEPROUD**

**MEMBER FOR WESTERN DOWNS**

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Hansard 6 September 2000

**WATER BILL**

**Hon. B. G. LITTLEPROUD** (Western Downs—NPA) (4.18 p.m.): In speaking to the Water Bill I wish to advise honourable members that I do not intend to be repetitious. Lots of things have been said already. A lot of the comments I will make relate to my electorate. Firstly, I think all honourable members acknowledge that there is a need for an update to the legislation that pertains to the use of water across Queensland. I acknowledge that this has flowed on from a COAG agreement. However, it does not always necessarily follow logically and scientifically that everything that flows from COAG must be right.

I think the Minister will regret the level of consultation with, or in some cases the way in which he ignored, some people who willingly worked very hard for a number of years to try to put some advice together. These people now feel like they have been ignored. I think that will come back to haunt the Minister. An article in today's Courier-Mail states—

"The salinity crisis in key Queensland rivers would not hit until 2050 despite earlier State Government claims of huge problems within the next 20 years."

That sort of statement is also going to make it difficult for the Minister's proposals to be accepted out there by the people whom I would term "practitioners". If I have a criticism of the legislation before the House—and I am pretty familiar with the Murray-Darling Basin—it is that those people who have worked so hard on various committees and who have been trying to put together workable solutions feel that they have been ignored and that the Bill has been dominated by non-practitioners. That is something that the Minister has to overcome.

There is a parallel between this piece of legislation and the Environmental Protection Act. The licensing provisions pertaining to that legislation were just about to be proclaimed when I became the Minister for Environment following the defeat of the Goss Government. The same thing happened with that legislation. That piece of legislation, put together by Molly Robson, had been dominated by non-practitioners in the business sector and the practitioners were up in arms because it lacked equity and had no regard to financial impact. Listening to previous speakers debate this Bill before the House today and yesterday, I have picked up the same vibes, that it lacks equity and lacks consideration of financial impact. I think the Minister is going to find that there are many problems to be sorted out before he gets this legislation right. It will be revisited many times and there will be ongoing criticism of the type referred to by the member for Burnett, who talked about the serious impost on those people who own land without any suggestion of compensation.

However, I will pay tribute to the Minister. I heard just recently that he was down south on a ministerial council and was being pressed to sign off on a cap on the amount of water coming out of the Murray-Darling in Queensland and he refused. It has been my experience over recent years that the people in the southern States, especially South Australia and Victoria, come up with some arguments that are not exactly accurate. The most recent revelation occurred when I attended a Landcare meeting at Jimbour House on the Darling Downs at which some of the Minister's DNR staff spoke about salinity. I have listened many times to the arguments of Senator Robert Hill, who was a resident of Adelaide. He argued very strongly that it is a terrible situation in Adelaide; that they will not be able to drink the water out of the Murray and that it is our fault as well as their own fault. One of the Minister's own scientists from Queensland got up and made the statement that it is not exactly a similar

situation. He pointed out that most of the land in the southern part of Australia through which the Murray flows used to be the bed of an inland sea and thus there are already high levels of salinity in that soil. However, that is not the case in the Murray-Darling Basin in Queensland. So they are two different situations.

That ties in with some of the assurances given by my colleague the member for Warrego, who talked about the sorts of studies that he recalls from his time as a Minister of that department. We were talking about rising salinity levels in Queensland. I see that the Minister has taken note of that. I suggest that he get some of his departmental officers to look at the research that has already been done into salinity, because I found it quite revealing.

I will now become a bit specific about the Condamine/Balonne Basin. I know that the Minister has already received many deputations not only from me but also from local government representatives, people tied up with Landcare and water users along that section of the river from Dalby to St George, which is regarded as the middle reaches of the river. He has acknowledged that the sorts of arguments we are putting forward are, in fact, valid. I have also heard comments attributed to the Minister when he was talking to those people in the St George/Dirranbandi area. Of course, they have criticisms that that part of the river is overallocated. The Minister said that he has to try to overcome their problems. He said that it probably has to be resolved at their end and not necessarily at the expense of people in other reaches of the river.

There has been relatively little development in the middle section of the river from Dalby through to St George in recent years. However, it has been proven by some of the DNR people and also by water users in my area that we generate a significant amount of water that flows into the Murray-Darling system, yet we impound very little of that water and we use only a small amount of it. Our argument has always been that we want equity. We have unused potential to further develop some of our agricultural land and we have a population that has a lot of skill in terms of crop husbandry. We do not want to be denied the chance to develop our resources using our share of the river in times to come. We have no argument, of course, about there being an environmental flow. We have been reassured—and I hope it follows through—that the Minister recognises the validity of our case. When it comes time for the next draft of the WAMP for this river, we hope that he will be able to make sure that we are treated fairly.

In the Chinchilla Shire there is one big tributary, the Charley's Creek, which flows out of quite sandy country down onto the black soils of the Darling Downs. It is along Charley's Creek that a horticultural industry has been established in the Chinchilla Shire which grows something like 25% of all the melons in Queensland. What those fellows can do is quite amazing. They can grow an acre of melons on half a megalitre of water and get a mass production of about \$10,000 an acre. When one thinks about that small amount of water generating that amount of productivity—and it also generates quite a few jobs—one can see the need to get the most efficient use of water.

The Minister and I have talked on occasions about how we have to become more efficient in the way we use our water and what we use it for. These people are aware of all those economic arguments and are a little bit frustrated because some of the attitudes at present are that that particular creek is unlikely to be given any decent sort of allocation unless they can get sleeper licences from off the river proper. I think there is an argument for the Minister to look very carefully at that case, following up on his argument about the most efficient uses of water in terms of economic return. He should give consideration to the claims being made by the water users of Chinchilla.

When we look at some of the smaller tributaries that flow into Charley's Creek we find that the situation gets a bit worse. I will just speak about my own personal situation. I own a property which has Canaga Creek running through it. I made some inquiries of DNR two or three years ago about my chances of water harvesting out of that creek. I was told that for drought mitigation purposes I would be allowed to irrigate 10 hectares. Adjacent to that creek there is some quite good country property, up to 60 or 70 acres of high quality deep loam that would be suitable for horticulture. The prospect of developing only 10 hectares was not very attractive, but it was made worse when I became aware of the fact that people not more than three miles away had been given the right to harvest overland flow and that they were able to irrigate up to 160 acres, yet I was not allowed to take it out of a watercourse. It was virtually the same water. That is another case of lack of equity. I acknowledge that this Bill faces the difficulty of trying to deal with varying situations across the State. Certainly on the upper reaches of the Condamine and across the Darling Downs there is an enormous growth in overland flow harvesting and there is a need for regulation of it.

I will just cite an experience I had when I went down to Shepparton in Victoria. They were already into water trading and had been into irrigation for a long time. I was able to go to an institute of sustainable irrigated agriculture down there and talk to some of the staff about how they manage the situation in Victoria. They said that essentially it is managed locally. Any decision that is handed down from Melbourne is met with derision and criticism. But if the local people are involved in the planning—and there are all sorts of committees and boards that deal with allocations, trading, salinity

and all those sorts of things—the decision is accepted. I can see a similar situation in this legislation in regard to water management plans for different areas. If the local people are part and parcel of putting it together and are part and parcel of the day-to-day management decisions, I think the Minister has more chance of making it work than if he comes in either at a ministerial level or at a director-general level and imposes a decision from Brisbane.

The practitioners are very sceptical about the non-practitioners. I refer to the article in today's Courier-Mail which states that scientific advice seems to be flawed. My advice is to try to make as much use as possible of the local planning on these sorts of issues. Of course, there are similarities with the vegetation management legislation in relation to local management plans, but it all depends on who is on the committees that formulate the plans, how they operate and whether or not they are dominated by the Minister or the director-general.

I now turn to two specific proposals for water storage on the Condamine within the electorate of Western Downs. I refer to the Condamine weir and Nangram weir. The Nangram weir is a very small proposal of only 2,000 megalitres. It is proposed to augment the Chinchilla Weir, from which water is released to people who hold irrigation allocations downstream. However, it is extremely inefficient. For example, if those people want 10 megalitres of their allocation, the Chinchilla Weir only has the capacity to release a minimum of 100 megalitres. Therefore, 100 megalitres has to be released to give those farmers their 10 megalitres. As members can see, it is highly inefficient. The locals went to DNR quite some time ago and suggested putting a weir near those people who need that kind of allocation. If that was to occur, they would be able to impound most of the water and save the water rather than waste it.

In that regard, planning had proceeded to the extent that there had been cultural record searches and drilling for the foundations of the weir. When Howard Hobbs, the member for Warrego, was the Minister, we were assured that the weir would be built within the term of the coalition Government. However, the coalition lost Government, and now it seems further away than ever. I have often said that this will not threaten the health of the river; this will enable more efficient use of water in the river. In fact, it would provide more surety for the water supply of Chinchilla and would enable 90 megalitres per 100 megalitres to be used effectively. If there was ever an area that needed access to assured water, it is the agricultural belt across the western downs.

The Condamine weir is somewhat similar but is a bigger structure. The proposed structure is anywhere between 10,000 to 12,000 megalitres. It is only a small structure within the banks of the river. It has also been advanced in its planning in that the cultural searches have been done and the drilling of the foundations had commenced. A local committee was formed which identified the various soil types adjacent to the river. It was aware of the fact that if it could get a fair bit of the water for horticultural use that would generate more jobs within the local community. It is terribly disappointing that, although it was almost there for the taking, all of a sudden there was a change of Government and the present Minister came along and put the WAMP in place.

The Murilla Shire Council commissioned a position paper in response to the draft Condamine/Balonne WAMP. I want to read some relevant sections from that paper. It states—

"The prohibition on the development of the Condamine and Nangram Weirs for environmental reasons is completely inconsistent with the conclusions of the Environmental Impact Study ... for the Condamine Weir which was produced for the Department of Natural Resources by Gutteridge Haskins Davey Pty Ltd. On any assessment the EIS provides the most comprehensive and solid justification yet received to proceed with construction of the Condamine Weir. In every instance cogent recommendations have been made so that impacts on the environment and on man-made infrastructure can be satisfactorily mitigated and managed. It should be remembered that both the Condamine and Nangram Weirs are anticipated to be relatively small structures (10,000—12,000 ML and less than 2,000 ML respectively) and in combination with other design and operational features it is anticipated that down stream impacts will be comparatively small (refer EIS pages 139 to 141). The ultimate recommendation of the EIS is that the construction and operation of the proposed Condamine Weir will provide positive benefits which will outweigh any adverse impacts ... The draft WAMP simply ignores completely the EIS and its findings in respect of the Condamine Weir. It is worthy to note that the EIS was released only months before the draft WAMP and in correspondence of 5 March 2000 the Council urged the Minister for Natural Resources to embrace the recommendations contained in the EIS because the EIS revealed no reasonable impediment to the Condamine Weir proceeding.

The outcomes of the draft WAMP do not give credit for the fact that the state of river health in the middle reaches of the river is superior to that of the upper and lower reaches. Nor does the draft WAMP give credit for the fact that the river is effectively 'recharged' by the time it leaves the middle region. This is due to a number of factors including the contribution of major tributaries such as Dogwood Creek along which there is negligible irrigation development. An

equitable WAMP would reward such contribution to river health whereas the draft WAMP does not."

I ask the Minister to continue his recognition of the validity of the case of the people in the middle reaches of the Condamine when he brings in the reviewed WAMP. I commend the Minister for taking a stand against capping the flow coming out of Queensland into the Murray-Darling system until such time as there is a full assessment. I support the Minister's stance in relation to people in the southern States of Australia in that they are trying to use Queensland's water to solve their problems. We have to look after ourselves and other States have to look after themselves. If we come up with some sort of environmental flow that keeps the river healthy after it leaves the boundaries of Queensland, we have done the right thing.

This is difficult legislation in all aspects. However, because the Minister is not allowing the practitioners enough consideration and because there is not enough consideration in relation to compensation for those people who will be badly affected financially, this legislation will have a difficult passage.

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