



Speech by

Mrs D. PRATT

MEMBER FOR BARAMBAH

Hansard 6 September 2000

WATER BILL

Mrs PRATT (Barambah—IND) (3.55 p.m.): Water is undeniably the most important issue of this century, because, without its proper management, there may be catastrophic effects in the future. It is often wiser to err on the side of caution when formulating legislation than to blindly plough on regardless.

The honourable member for Thuringowa has reported to this House that less than 3% of the earth's drinking water is fit for human consumption, with approximately 50% of that locked up in ice and inaccessible ground water. When we look at such frighteningly low figures, it brings into perspective the fragility of life on this planet. It is not hard to see why certain individuals and green groups get into a lather and urge Governments to bring in extreme legislation. In the same report it is stated that, along with chemicals, oil being poured down sinks and fertiliser, cigarette butts are a major source of pollution of our water from people flicking them from their vehicles or tossing them into the gutters as they walk down the street. These cigarette butts get washed into stormwater drains, and stormwater is not treated before it is discharged into our creeks and rivers. So we can see that there are many factors—not just the actions of land-holders—that need attention when addressing the issue of water preservation.

It is understandable and admirable that people are prepared to fight for their environment. There is no-one more aware of water conservation or management than the man or woman on the land who relies on water for his or her existence. That is not to say that there are not those who knowingly abuse the system. Unlike many in larger towns and cities who are water conscious only when their council imposes restrictions or a water main ruptures, people on the land are aware every day just how they will fare over the coming seasons if they do not get the rains they need or manage their water properly.

As we speak, many land-holders are searching the sky for clouds that herald rain to minimise the damage of not only the fire season but to stave off drought for those not yet suffering a drought, or relieve it if they are. I ask this Government to remember that and to not continually label land-holders as the enemy, as was done in the case of the vegetation legislation. All land-holders are interested in is a reasonable solution. What they do not want is one that will see their whole lifestyle diminished or destroyed.

This Bill endeavours to establish a sustainable management framework for the planning, allocation and use of water and other resources. It is aiming to introduce a framework for service providers to cover water standards for customers and dam safety. This Bill has been introduced in the hope of stopping the degradation of our landscape through the management of this vital resource. There is no doubt that the practices of the past cannot continue. The continuing creeping of the salt pans of the Murray-Darling River system has demonstrated this fact to us.

In saying that, I must add there are many concerns for many land-holders and councils in this Bill. The Minister for Natural Resources has made much of the fact that this is the first time in 90 years that water laws have been reviewed. It therefore goes without saying that much has changed during that time, and there may very well be a lot to address. The very fact that the Minister has brought in 61 pages containing in excess of 180 amendments in the past day shows how difficult it apparently has been to get the Bill right. It must therefore follow that if the Minister and his department had such

difficulty bringing this Bill to Parliament, he cannot expect us to analyse the book of amendments and their effects on the Bill itself in two days.

I have no doubt that drafting legislation is difficult, but this Government is constantly rushing Bills through which have obviously not been thought through clearly and that necessitate so many amendments at short notice. In business, so many adjustments to a document after its presentation would be an indication that the groundwork and research had not been carried out efficiently and would be seen as incompetence. Unfortunately for the rural sector of Queensland, Mr Welford and his statements regarding dingoes, farmers' wives driving trucks to town to get cheap fuel and various other equally stupid statements have proved terribly painful. I would feel sorry for this public display of inadequacy by the Minister, but I feel more sorry for the people who suffer because of the legislation that he puts forward.

To the Minister's credit, he has not approached water management with a blanket attitude but has produced water management plans for different areas and endeavoured to take into account the varying factors of the water systems of those areas. One of the concerns of many stakeholders is the reduction of current water allocations. As other speakers have stated during this debate, stakeholders face possible losses of up to 80% which, for some irrigators, is totally unacceptable.

The Minister has stated that the financial ramifications of this Bill on individual stakeholders will be reviewed in 12 months. That statement in itself shows the Minister's lack of understanding of the very effect that this legislation will have on those stakeholders. For many, 12 months will be too late. This is not gloom and doom talk; it is fact. Over the years, many stakeholders have invested vast amounts of money in setting up infrastructure. Under this legislation, their investment is going to be severely affected.

Farmers have grave concerns—quite justifiably—regarding an appeal against the reduction of their allocations and what compensation they may receive. What rights of appeal or compensation do these stakeholders have—stakeholders who are to lose part of their water allocation? The answer is that, in this Bill, there are no right of appeal or compensation provisions. Just as there is a lack of compensation in the vegetation management legislation and minimalist compensation for the dairy industry, losers out of the water allocation process just have to wear the results of this legislation and make the most of it.

That is not an easy thing for farmers to do when they are being kicked constantly by this Government. There appears to be a constant eroding of the common law rights of the people who work and live in the rural areas of this State by their own Government. Over the past 10 years or so, since Sir Joh's day, not one Government has really had an interest in the land. Although he was not perfect, Sir Joh worked the land. He knew and understood the land. Since his time, no Government has taken any real interest in the problems or needs of rural industry. The Labor Party has never understood the land, and the Nationals have pandered to the Liberals and lost their way, deserting the very people whom they were supposed to represent.

There have been some favourable comments from many people about the Burnett WAMP, but as in all things, it is difficult to get any consensus. However, most people agree that water allocations are restricted and that there will be an adverse effect not only on rural industry but also on the towns and service industries of the area. Many factors must be taken into consideration, and I am not convinced that they have been. In his second-reading speech, the Minister stated that the Department of Natural Resources will become the regulator of the framework pertaining to water service providers. I am sure the Minister is fully aware that local government is opposed to that and believes that regulations should be independent of the DNR.

There are winners and losers out of this water reform, and it is very unfair that rural land-holders must bear 100% of the brunt of this legislation. These reforms will revolutionise the way we farm our land and how we use our water, as they should do. However, one thing is very clear: the only farmers we will have in years to come will be those who have a guaranteed supply of water. Water will become the new cash cow. It has been stated that farmers will become land and water managers to be serviced by corporatised water bodies as Governments split their roles as water managers and regulators. We are not too far down the track to privatisation and the devastation that appears to follow such a transition.

It is a shame that the concept of a Water Bill, which had the support of all members in this House, has been lost with this particular Bill. There are positives in this Bill and there are negatives. I have insufficient time to evaluate the extensive list of amendments and their effects on the Barambah electorate. I cannot support this Bill.
