



Speech by

**Mr DOUG SLACK**

**MEMBER FOR BURNETT**

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Hansard 12 April 2000

**WATER STORAGE, BURNETT RIVER**

**Mr SLACK** (Burnett—NPA) (6 p.m.): I move—

"That this Parliament notes that 10 months have elapsed since the Beattie Government voted to break the Premier's election promise to construct a major water storage on the Burnett River within five years.

Further, that this Parliament condemns the Beattie Government for failing to progress the construction of the water storage any further since that date."

When it comes to water infrastructure in Queensland, this Government is all talk and no action. Premier Beattie was all talk before the election when he told the people of Bundaberg and the Burnett that he would match the coalition's pledge to build a water storage facility on the Burnett River within five years. He was very talkative when he told a Channel 7 television news crew three days before the election—

"If it can be done sooner than five years, that's the target."

The member for Bundaberg has also had a lot to say about this issue since she was elected on the basis that water and jobs would be the No. 1 priority of a Labor Government for Bundaberg.

But what has this Government delivered other than talk? This Government has had 22 months to show to the people of Bundaberg and the Burnett that they are serious about improving water infrastructure in the region. What have they done? The farmers are still waiting for improvements to water capacity on the Walla and Bucca Weirs. This work was approved by the coalition Cabinet early in 1998 and the farmers still wait. We were told that the 1999-2000 Budget included funding for Walla Weir Stage 2, but it is April and still we wait for the work to begin. This is also the case with the proposed Paradise dam.

This Government has been full of hot air about the so-called speeding up of the water allocation management plan for the Burnett River catchment. But let me tell the House how this Government fast-tracks its WAMP process. In July last year the Department of Natural Resources said the WAMP would be completed by April 2000. Note the time frame, Minister. What is the date now? They then made the big announcement before Christmas that the process was being fast-tracked, would members believe. But it is now April, the original deadline for the WAMP.

**Mr Welford:** Watch this space.

**Mr SLACK:** This fast-track, super speedy version of the process still has not been delivered. I am watching this space.

**Mr Welford:** You will have egg all over your face.

**Mr SLACK:** I am pleased to hear that; I really am. I would love to have egg all over my face. Once again, this Government is all talk and no action. The farmers in the Burnett district whose existing major water storages have dwindled once again to precarious levels still wait. They are still waiting for the Beattie Labor Government to begin the impact assessment study which they told us would be conducted concurrently with the WAMP. They are still waiting for the Department of Natural Resources to announce a preferred site for the dam so that some real environmental studies can get under way.

The people of the Burnett are getting fed up with this Government's hollow rhetoric. A group of local growers and businessmen have taken the unprecedented step of erecting a roadside billboard to remind the Premier and the member for Bundaberg of their pre-election promises. Motorists along a very busy stretch of the Isis Highway are greeted with the cheesy grins of Mr Beattie, Mrs Cunningham and Mr Welford in caricature. I have a copy of the billboard with me. Mr Speaker might like it.

**An Opposition member:** You should table it.

**Mr SLACK:** I will table it.

**Mrs Nita Cunningham:** Is that the one you paid for?

**Mr SLACK:** It shows the smiling face of Mr Beattie saying, "We will build it in five years"—June 1998. Then there is the honourable member for Bundaberg. I am glad she is interjecting. On the billboard she says, "Labor will honour its commitment to Paradise dam"—June 1998. Here comes Rod. The billboard says, "Rod, have you the political will to deliver Labor's promises on time, the 1998 election promises from the Labor Party?" I will table it. This billboard is a sign of the frustration of the people in the area. It is a larger than life signal from the people of my district that they expect the Premier to keep his word.

Last month Tate and Lyle and several major investors announced an investigation into plans to establish a bagasse paper pulping mill in my electorate. This billion dollar project would take advantage of our local products, including the ilmenite mine at Monto. It will be based on environmentally sound recycling principles and has the potential to create the economic boost that Bundaberg and surrounding communities so urgently need. This is not the first time a major employment generating project has been put forward in this area. In the past, several other value-adding projects have gone begging after a cursory look at the limited water resources at Bundaberg. In a region where unemployment is among the highest in the nation, this is more than frustrating. It is the reason that the Borbidge-led coalition Government initiated the whole of catchment Burnett studies, undertook engineering and feasibility studies and committed itself to the five-year time line.

I know that it is now impossible for the water storage to be completed within the five-year target the then Opposition Leader pledged before the election. I will watch this space, as the Minister said. However, greater efforts can still be made by this Government. For example, just recently it came to the attention of the Bundaberg media that the State Government has ceased funding to the Department of Primary Industries' lungfish monitoring and baseline studies.

Those studies were part of an agreement by the coalition Government with the Federal Environment Minister, Robert Hill, to ensure that the construction of Walla Weir would be accompanied by proper research into the population and breeding activities of the Burnett River lungfish. Those studies have not been completed and the State Government is casting around for the Federal Government to complete this work, estimated to cost about \$163,000. All this is wasting time and delaying the many important studies which need to be finalised before a dam such as Paradise can proceed.

The member for Bundaberg has been quoted on ABC radio as saying that the State Government is committed to the dam, regardless of the study. Is that correct, member for Bundaberg?

**Mrs Nita Cunningham:** That is not what I said.

**Mr SLACK:** That is the quote I have here. I am quite happy to table it. The transcript I have states—

"It's a total research into lungfish, it's got nothing to do with the planning for any future infrastructure on the Burnett."

I have never heard such a naive statement. I for one have not forgotten the struggle the coalition Government had to get the relatively small Walla Weir built. Mrs Cunningham seems to have forgotten about the powerful environmental lobby which brought national pressure to bear on our Government over the lungfish issue. Do I really need to remind her of the environmentalists' call for an international boycott of Bundaberg Sugar and the public debate which raged over the future of the Burnett River lungfish?

If this Government was serious about a major water storage on the Burnett, there would be no quibbling about \$163,000 to complete the lungfish study. It is vital that that work is done. I would be interested to hear the Minister's response to that. The environmentalists would absolutely hang their hat on this issue if either the studies being undertaken by the DPI fisheries biologist are not completed or if all efforts are not made to ensure that the fish ladder on the Burnett River barrage is operating effectively.

Once again, it is obvious that, while this Government tells us that they are committed to a reliable water supply for the Burnett, they have not backed this up with action. Ten months ago the coalition asked the Premier to restate his commitment to the Paradise dam and this Government

rejected the motion. Remember that that happened 10 months ago. They rewrote our call for action into some mealy-mouthed platitude which gave no time line for this project. The people of the Burnett need some firm commitment from this Government and potential investors need some firm commitment from this Government. More than that, after 22 months of Labor Government, they need to see some action. This Parliament should condemn the Beattie Government for failing to progress the construction of the major water storage on the Burnett.

Nobody here disputes that long-term water security relies on good planning, but when this Government refuses to fully commit its resources to ensure that this planning is done in a time-effective way, such as to studies which can be carried out simultaneously, one can be forgiven for concluding that the only plan this Government has is to drag its feet and head off conflict with the environmental lobby. Let us hear less talk and see some action.

Let this Parliament make no mistake about it: the member for Bundaberg is likely to get up and say that it was not the coalition that built the Walla Weir; Ed Casey as Minister built the Walla Weir. The fact is that a Cabinet meeting of the coalition Government in Bundaberg made the decision to fund and build the Walla Weir. They are the facts.

Time expired.

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