



Speech by

**Mr L. SPRINGBORG**

**MEMBER FOR WARWICK**

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Hansard 6 September 2000

### **WATER BILL**

**Mr SPRINGBORG** (Warwick—NPA) (Deputy Leader of the Opposition) (12.16 p.m.): This Bill is certainly one of the most controversial pieces of legislation that will come before this Parliament this year with the exception, I suppose, of the Vegetation Management Bill, which will be debated some time later this sitting week, or maybe even later than that. There is little doubt that the issue of water management is very controversial. I am sure the Minister has a good appreciation of that from his discussions with people involved in the water industry and people who seek to regulate water usage in this State. I came to appreciate that fact when, as Minister for Natural Resources in Queensland, I talked to people about WAMPs. I went out to the Cooper catchment area to look at the potential utilisation of water for broadacre irrigation. We were looking at how the Government could go about balancing the competing needs of the community with the need to encourage economic development, to encourage an irrigation industry and to ensure that consideration was given to environmental issues.

Certainly in my area a lot of people have been talking about the water allocation management planning process, or the water management planning process, depending upon the way in which it is being implemented in their area, and what is going to happen with regulation in the future. The reason that the people are very much concerned about this issue is that they have invested a great deal of money in their properties over a period. I have only to go further down the system from my area to the proposed Condamine/Balonne WAMP area to understand the feelings of those people in the Dirranbandi and St George areas. Many of those people have invested hundreds of thousands—and in some cases tens of millions—of dollars in putting in infrastructure and they have also borrowed money, which means that they have to meet significant commitments. I know that the shadow Minister has been made very well aware of this in his discussions with those people.

People are extremely concerned about what the Government is seeking to achieve through its water legislation. This Bill provides the legislative mechanism for the water allocation management planning process. It also reforms the way in which water has been allocated and regulated in the State over a long time, and injects new concepts, such as vesting the ownership of all water in the Crown—something that is creating a significant degree of concern in the community. I understand, though, that people who wish to develop a stock and domestic water supply at a reasonable level from overland flow will still be able to do so. I am a little sympathetic to the point of view that, instead of vesting ownership of all water that falls on one's land in the Crown, perhaps it is better to address issues on an area-by-area basis depending upon the demand in those areas. Certainly, in other jurisdictions around Australia the Government has sought to charge on that basis. When the *What Price is Water?* document was released, people were concerned that they would pay for water that fell in their rainwater tank. That is not what this legislation addresses. However, people do have issues and concerns about the vesting of water ownership in the Crown, and I will be interested to see how the issue of overland flow evolves.

I think we all concede that there are areas of extremely high stress across Queensland. I think we are all keen to address the issue and come up with the best mechanism for doing that. On certain parts of the Darling Downs and in other parts of Queensland there are concerns. Equally, there are areas in Queensland where this will never be a significant issue, because of the limited number of people who live in those areas, the limited development opportunities and the sheer volumes of water that run across those areas of the State throughout the year.

It is very important for the Parliament to recognise that any regulatory regime needs to be properly targeted and that it does not need to be overreactionary; that it needs to balance all of those considerations and also ensure equity. When I was the Minister and we were looking at the water allocation management planning process for the Condamine and the Balonne, one thing was very apparent to me. And we should bear in mind that these processes have been going on in Queensland for some five years now. It is a challenge for reference panels to work through some of these issues. The model runs are also challenging; there is a great deal of data.

Before I became the Minister, about four or five years ago, when the Fitzroy WAMP was in its gestation stage, I was told at a briefing that merely changing some of the data in that model run would create hundreds of thousands of pages of output. That is the significance of changing a few of the variables in a model run. There is a lot of toing-and-froing and concern from people about the credibility of the information being used in the process. There is concern on the part of people on reference panels that they may not be getting access to all of the data. When draft WAMPs are released, people in the public say that the department has not properly considered social or economic aspects in the development of a water allocation management plan.

In relation to the Condamine/Balonne, one issue brought to my attention some years ago—and it continues to be brought to my attention—is the need for an equitable distribution in the development of the irrigation industry in that area. I think we would all concede that the area is very close to the point of maximum development, if it has not reached that stage already. I refer to the area around St George, Dirranbandi and perhaps a bit upstream from there.

In Chinchilla, downstream from Dalby, I believe there is an opportunity to ensure that those people share equitably in any additional water that can be identified. There are a couple of very small weirs in that area. If we were to compare the amount of water involved there, we would see that it is just a drop in the ocean. However, people are concerned that they may not have the opportunity to benefit from any new water development. There are opportunities in that area. In Chinchilla the water melon industry and other sunrise industries are very important.

In my area on the Upper Condamine there is significant concern about the way in which the water allocation management planning process is being undertaken and about its impacts. I will come back to that in a moment.

At this stage, there is no draft WAMP for the border rivers. It is probably not all that far away. But there are some issues in relation to it. I think the Minister is on public record as saying that his preferred position is for no further extraction from the border rivers part of the State. One of the challenges for his officers in that part of Queensland lies in developing this in consultation with New South Wales. The rivers in that area split New South Wales from Queensland. It is also fair to say that the amount of development in New South Wales is far and above the amount of development in Queensland. We would continue to argue that there is not an equitable distribution of development opportunities for water between the States.

One of the challenges for the Minister on the Murray-Darling Basin ministerial council is to ensure that Queensland is not made a scapegoat for the overdevelopment which has occurred in New South Wales and Victoria. I understand that, at a recent meeting down there, the Queensland Minister laid it on the line to the Minister. That is to his credit. Even though some of the things I hear him saying from time to time concern me a great deal, I understand that he firmly advocated Queensland's position at the last meeting. That is something that he has to continue to do. I went to only one of those meetings. At the briefing for that meeting I was told that we would be lined up by the Commonwealth and all of the other States because they would want to use us to balance their social conscience; in other words, they would try to blame Queensland for the amount of overdevelopment or the poor state of the Murray-Darling system.

The majority of water that originates in the Murray-Darling section in Queensland, which I understand covers about 25% of the State and produces about 15% of the water, runs out of Queensland into New South Wales and further down the system. That is not to say that we do not have a responsibility. However, I caution that it does provide us with some opportunities to be able to underwrite areas of Queensland that need further development to ensure their economic viability.

**Mr Welford:** If science is any indication, we have lost our innocence.

**Mr SPRINGBORG:** I will be interested to hear some more about that. Recently, I was looking at a document from the commission headquarters in Canberra—it was from an irrigators meeting—which illustrated in graph form a comparison of the amount of water originating on Queensland's part of the Murray-Darling Basin and the amount actually used. There was a fair difference between the amount used and the amount falling in Queensland. I would be interested to see the Minister's latest data. I think there is an opportunity for a proportional increase in the amount of water that we continue to extract from the system, if it is managed properly. I will bring a couple of examples to the Minister's attention in a moment. We need to be careful about this.

At the moment there are two examples in my electorate that worry me. The Minister is aware of the proposal by the Stanthorpe Shire Council for the development of a new dam on the Granite Belt to be located somewhere near Ballandean. The majority of the water that originates from the Granite Belt runs further down the system. And I suppose some of it may be used, once it gets towards or past Goondiwindi, by the irrigated crops industry in that area, and an amount is used in horticulture around Stanthorpe, but most of it runs out of that system.

My concern is to ensure that at the same time as providing an opportunity for further development there is also a need to underwrite the provision of water for domestic use in and around Stanthorpe. I think that is something that the Minister is aware of. The amount of water that that council has at the moment may stand it in good stead for the next half decade, but it is not going to go very much beyond that. There is a need for a little bit more water to underwrite development on the Granite Belt.

The new dam would provide an annual yield of around 8,000 megalitres, which in the scheme of things is a very, very small amount of water. It is an amount of water which many individual irrigators in Queensland, particularly in the southern area of Queensland, provide for themselves. There are private developments in the southern part of the State that store several hundred thousand megalitres. We need to consider the commercial, domestic and agricultural requirements of the Granite Belt, which does not have a major water storage.

The proposed water storage would be so minute compared with even the smallest dams that we tend to build around Queensland as to be almost dismissed out of hand. I would be very concerned that, going on the Minister's statements, it may be ruled out. I know that some people out there are saying that he has indicated that he would not like to see any more extraction from the border rivers. I am just seeking an assurance that that does not extend to proposed water storage for the Granite Belt, which is not just for some limited irrigation opportunity but very much to underwrite the future of the town of Stanthorpe and also the surrounding little villages. I would like some assurances from the Minister, because I understand that at the moment things are bogged down.

**Mr Sullivan:** But isn't that the problem? Everyone wants their little bit, but the aggregate effect of that is what the Minister has got to cope with.

**Mr SPRINGBORG:** I would just say that 8,000 megalitres is a very, very small amount of water.

**Mr Sullivan:** Sure, they want that; the cotton farmers want something else; the other farmers want something else; and the towns want something else.

**Mr SPRINGBORG:** The difference with this particular proposal is that one of its primary focuses is for domestic use. There are some irrigation opportunities, but the amount of water which the irrigators are seeking there is very, very small. It is minute when compared with people who might be using 10,000 megalitres on their own property throughout the course of a year. We are talking about 8,000 megalitres, probably 80% of that for the entire Granite Belt and the town of Stanthorpe.

We do need some assurances because there is a concern out there about the future for our town area. There is the equity issue that I have been trying to talk about. If we had known these things 50 or 100 years ago, maybe we would then have divided our catchments and said, "You are going to have a certain amount, you are going to have a certain amount and you are going to have a certain amount." Over the years there has been an extraordinary amount of development in certain areas. The cotton industry, for example, is doing exceptionally well in Australia at the moment in terms of returns to producers and the flow-on effect for the communities. That is extraordinarily good. But there is this equity issue in which there is not an equal distribution of water along the river systems. People are concerned that, because of the overdevelopment in some areas we are going to see a situation in which other areas are completely closed off. I am saying that we need to consider all of those scenarios, and consider them properly, and we need to understand that one action here could have a very, very negative reaction not only for an irrigation community but also the development of a town.

I would like to talk about a meeting of the Cunningham and District Irrigators Association which was held just outside Warwick and which I attended recently. In 1990 or 1991, those people were part of a beneficial use review in that area in relation to 92 megalitres of water. Honourable members should keep in mind that many people actually spill more water than that in priming their flood pumps. This water was actually identified as not being used to its best effect and at that stage a commitment was given that irrigators in the area would have an opportunity to tender for it in 10 megalitre lots. Ten megalitres is probably enough to produce about two hectares. It might be three hectares, depending upon the year. It is a very, very small amount of water. They have been waiting for a long time. They have been given all sorts of commitments by the Department of Natural Resources that there is an opportunity for the process to be put in place. Even as late as early this year they had had a commitment from officers of the Department of Natural Resources reconfirming the commitments which had been given in the early nineties and confirming that the process that had been put in place would continue.

I understand that the Minister has put this on hold and has said, "No, that will not now be happening. We will be waiting for the outcome of the Condamine/Balonne WAMP." I just do not think that that is fair when one considers that it is 92 megalitres and that we had a process which was started prior to water allocation management planning in Queensland and also prior to this new legislation. There is a basic decency issue here; I think we need to stick to our word. I am hoping to take a deputation of those irrigators to the Minister—I have actually requested a deputation—to talk about this issue, because I have a lot of sympathy for their position. It concerns 92 megalitres identified before the Murray-Darling interim caps, before the water allocation management planning and before the new legislation. Until recent months those people have been led to believe that it was all in place, that in an open tendering process they would have a chance to purchase this water in 10 megalitre lots, and now it has been stopped. It is water that was previously and is currently captured in the system; it is there. It is there in the Leslie Dam and it is something which is currently factored into water use. I would just like a commitment from the Minister that he will look at revisiting that particular issue, because it is extremely important to those people.

Another issue—and this is why I think we need to be moving with some degree of speed and certainty towards a conclusion on all this planning—is that a number of applications have been held up awaiting the outcome of WAMPs and also the deliberations on the Murray-Darling Basin. It affects people who want to go into small viticulture operations and maybe have enough water for four or five hectares. We are not talking about broadacre irrigated agriculture; we are talking about niche marketing, niche agriculture that actually produces a maximum return for the amount of water that is used. If we look at wine production, it involves certain tonnages of grapes and then real value-added products and commodities. The same principle applies to horticulture. Many of those applications out there have been held up. Much about this Bill concerns me and we should be looking at some amendments to it.

Time expired.

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