



Speech by

Mr L. SPRINGBORG

MEMBER FOR WARWICK

Hansard 4 October 2000

ELECTRICITY AMENDMENT BILL

Mr SPRINGBORG (Warwick—NPA) (Deputy Leader of the Opposition) (3.36 p.m.): I rise briefly to raise a few concerns that I have regarding the electricity industry and ways that we can seek to ensure that certain service standards are met. People need to know that they have a regular, reliable and cost-effective supply of electricity.

As the Minister is very much aware, much of my electorate is covered by a supply agreement with the New South Wales electricity distributor Northpower. That agreement certainly covers the Inglewood Shire, the Goondiwindi council and also the Waggamba Shire—a fairly significant area. This supply agreement has been in place for a long time. Generally, it has delivered reasonably good-quality electricity.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Minister for his interaction on this issue. At the end of June, I led a delegation to see the Minister to talk about some of the issues of concern to councils and communities. Those concerns included the conditions in the supply agreement, augmentation and electricity supply. The Minister undertook to have discussions with Northpower to attempt to address some of those issues and concerns. He subsequently had those discussions and I look forward to catching up with him tomorrow, I think it is, to go through some of those matters.

I would like to bring the Parliament up to date as to why those issues have arisen. Over the last three or four years many consumers have expressed very serious reservations about the continuous lack of good-quality electricity that is being delivered to them. Those concerns have arisen as a result of some of the changes to the electricity industry not only in New South Wales but also in Queensland. In that time we have certainly seen a winding back of localised maintenance systems. For example, Inglewood and Texas used to have people there on the spot. Those maintenance staff have now largely gone to Goondiwindi, which is much further away, and they have a much greater area to cover. People consider that the degree of emphasis and commitment to maintenance that existed for a long period does not exist anymore.

A good example of that is the issue of a reliable supply of electricity. The situation has emerged where the electricity supply is irregular, to the extent that tests result in supply of much less than 220 volts. This is causing significant damage to equipment such as computers, fax machines and refrigerators. When there are storms, in some instances people are experiencing outages that last longer than they have in the past. I have been told anecdotally that the commitment to maintenance and refurbishment is not as strong as it was in the past. There is probably a degree of truth in that.

Currently there is an issue about the augmentation of that electricity supply. The Minister has furnished me with some of the options that Northpower is currently considering for boosting the reliability of supply to that particular area. I thank him for that. Some of those options will not be coming on line for the next couple of years, but they involve things such as bringing in another feeder line from near Moree and also bringing in a line from the Bulli Creek substation off the new Powerlink interconnector. Those options may be very good. We just need to make sure that they address the concerns of those three local government areas that take electricity from Northpower.

Concerns that have been expressed to me—and the Minister is very much aware of them—include the inability of people who are in that service area to get copies of the service

agreement. I understand that the Minister has had discussions with Northpower about that. Northpower has undertaken to speak to the councils individually to find out the aspects they are concerned about. However, I think in dealing with these issues we need to ensure that there is a transparent approach so that people are confident that they are getting value for money and that the commitment by the Queensland Government to supply electricity to consumers in those areas has been fulfilled. At present there is a little bit of unease about that issue, and I think that needs to be addressed.

People have asked me what would happen if their electrical equipment was damaged as a consequence of the delivery of a poor-quality and irregular electricity supply and how they would go about addressing that issue. Certainly, there have been articles in the paper in which Northpower has said that if the damage is their fault, they will pay for it. People would like to know how they are able to ensure a degree of independent oversight to bring about a successful conclusion to their claims. I would like to hear from the Minister as to how this legislation affects them—whether it disempowers them or provides them with options, in this rather unique supply area, to be able to have those grievances heard and addressed in a fair, open and transparent way.

I want to refer to one issue which at the moment is of extreme concern to people in the western part of Goondiwindi, and that is the Kayawana community bore. This community bore has been redeveloped and put in place in conjunction with the Department of Natural Resources and water users out that way. There has been a significant contribution from Government and a significant contribution from those local people to reticulate that water to their individual properties. It is extremely important to ensure a water supply for stock.

However, one thing that keeps coming through to me—and has been for the past 12 months—is that the inconsistent quality of the electricity supply is causing those people enormous problems. They have automatic pumping, which is fitted with alarms. When there is a fall-off in the quality of electricity—spikes up the end of the line, so to speak—that really adds to their cost of running and maintaining that system. It should be borne in mind that when something goes wrong people have to call out an electrician. Sometimes that electrician has to travel many, many kilometres—maybe 100 kilometres—to fix the problem. That costs a lot of money. What happens if the system goes out after-hours or at inconvenient hours? People's stock are put at risk as well as the other uses to which the water is put.

The people of that area are very, very concerned about the inconsistent quality of electricity that has been delivered in their part of the world, that is, the Bungunya-Talwood area. Over the years these people have made approaches to the authorities, and they believe that they have not received a satisfactory response. I understand that there is going to be a meeting at Goondiwindi next Monday at which people are going to be talking about these issues. However, those property owners are also faced with putting up the contributions that they have to make to this scheme to cover the cost of maintenance needed as a consequence of the irregular quality of electricity that is being delivered up that line.

That is the one of the quirky things that I am sure honourable members can appreciate comes from having an inconsistent quality of electricity. Not only does that affect people's households and their ability to be able to enjoy a proper quality of life, whether that be watching the television, washing their clothes, cooking their dinner, or whatever; it also affects people who rely on that bore to deliver their water. The inconsistent quality of electricity has had a profoundly detrimental effect in that area.

I raise this issue in Parliament because I believe that out of these augmentation plans there needs to be a guarantee that such problems will be fixed and that there will be a consistent quality of electricity that does not impact upon the technology that is required to pump water. We know how sensitive a lot of equipment is to electricity quality. Certainly, as we deal with more high-technology equipment in the year 2000, that issue is going to be more and more important. We all know what it is like sitting at our computer, or any device that we might use in our home office, when we have an interrupted power supply and experience a brownout. When there are many thousands of dollars at stake and there is stock at stake, this issue becomes even more significant.

In the past, some of these issues have been dismissed by those who are responsible for ensuring the delivery of proper, regular-quality electricity. In some cases they treat the people who raise these complaints in a very paternalistic or patronising way. I do not think that is good enough. If these complaints are raised, then they should be considered seriously and investigated. Over the past two or three years issues have been raised by many consumers who have never noticed a problem before. For that reason alone, we know that we have a problem, and that problem needs to be addressed. I raise those issues for the attention of the Parliament and the Minister.
