



Speech by

Dr LESLEY CLARK

MEMBER FOR BARRON RIVER

Hansard 6 September 2000

WATER BILL

Dr CLARK (Barron River—ALP) (3.37 p.m.): It is with pleasure that I rise to contribute to the debate on the Water Bill 2000. As members from both sides have recognised, this is one of the most important pieces of legislation to ever go through this House. If anyone doubts the need for this legislation, they need look no further than the crisis facing the Murray-Darling Basin. Salinity is known to be a major problem, but the extent is frightening. 2,500 tonnes of salt is washed down the river system every day. It is estimated that it is possible that agricultural land the size of Victoria will be unusable in 50 years' time. Adelaide's water is fast becoming undrinkable.

When it is appreciated that the Murray-Darling Basin contains 42% of Australia's farms and produces 90% of Australia's irrigated crops, representing about \$22.8 billion of national agricultural exports, the need for remedial action is obvious. The situation arose because water management was based on a philosophy of resource development rather than one of conservation and sustainable use. It is the same philosophy that was endorsed by the conservative Government of the Bjelke-Petersen era that is responsible for the problems Queensland rivers are facing today. The contributions of many members opposite demonstrate the difficulty they have in really embracing the new philosophy of ecologically sustainable use needed to manage our rivers.

Members may think that in the Wet Tropics, where annual rainfall is measured in metres, water would be less of a controversial issue than it is in some of the drier areas of the State, but nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the water pricing policy required under the COAG agreement, whereby large local authorities have had to introduce two-part water tariffs comprising a fixed cost of access and a volume-driven cost—user pays—was a key issue in the Cairns local government election. Whilst there was fierce opposition at the time, demand for water has reduced significantly, allowing savings to be made by delaying construction of new water infrastructure in Cairns. Water is no longer being wasted and people are finally realising that just because water falls from the sky it is not a free commodity to be squandered but rather one to be used wisely.

The Barron River, from which my electorate takes its name and which runs through the middle of my electorate, has more demands placed on it and poses more challenging management problems than almost any other river in this State. It currently provides for the following uses: irrigation for the farms of the Atherton Tableland in the Mareeba/Dimbulah irrigation area, which include tobacco, fruit and vegetables, and, more recently, an expanding sugar industry following construction of the Arriga mill; local recreational opportunities, including water-skiing on Lake Tinaroo and swimming along its length; urban water supply for Mareeba, Kuranda and Cairns; tourism, with white-water rafting from below the falls to Lake Placid and riverboat cruises at Kuranda; acceptance of secondary treated sewerage from Mareeba, Kuranda and Cairns and the agricultural run-off of nutrients and pesticides; and generation of electricity at the Barron Gorge hydro power station. Obviously, it is a significant challenge for a river to be used in such diverse ways and still remain a healthy ecosystem.

In light of all of those demands, it is hardly surprising that planning for new water storage has been a high priority, as has the preparation of a water allocation management plan—or WAMP—which with the passing of this Bill will become a statutory plan rather than just a policy. Without the kinds of reforms that are provided for in the Water Bill, the future for the Barron River—which has already been significantly modified following the construction of the Tinaroo Dam—was looking very grim. The existing

legislation makes no express provision for allocating water for the environment. The other uses to which I have referred would, I am sure, always take precedence, because economic imperatives always win out over ecological imperatives unless Government actively intervenes.

The existing legislation also fails the farmers as demand for water increases, because the current incremental licensing system is not secure for entitlement holders as a licence is issued for a limited period only and its value can be eroded as water availability becomes less reliable. Licences are also susceptible to change or cancellation by Government without compensation. The inability to trade water entitlements also prevents its most efficient use. Those serious flaws in the existing legislation seem to have been forgotten or ignored by speakers opposite, because when they were in Government they never refused farmers any water or encouraged water efficiency, adopting instead short-term political expediency over responsible use of our natural resources which, sadly, is the hallmark of conservative Governments. There is a legacy of environmental problems with which we have to deal today.

Thus the Water Bill, which will be opposed by the coalition, is a vital piece of legislation because it develops a modern regime for improving the security of supply for future water users—surely the most important and basic requirement for farmers. It also ensures that water resource developments are sustainable, while at the same time the legislation protects the health of rivers and catchments—surely the most important basic requirement for our whole community.

I am pleased to report that by all accounts the development of the Barron River WAMP is progressing well. True, it has not been a fast process, but these things take time. Similarly, the outcomes to date have not equally pleased all the stakeholders, but that should not come as any surprise, either, and indeed, if any one stakeholder group was totally satisfied, then the WAMP would not be delivering a fair outcome and meeting its objectives for sustainable allocation and management of water, including environmental flows. The technical work on the WAMP by local DNR staff has been of the highest calibre, and the commitment by members of the Community Advisory Committee has also been exceptional, and I commend them all for their work.

I have sat and listened to both the irrigators and the conservationists, and I believe that the final WAMP will fairly reflect their input and perspectives. I do not believe that the irrigators will see any significant reduction in their current allocations, and there will be enhanced environmental flows, particularly in dry times, which will improve riverine ecology. However, there are limits as to how long the proposed Barron River WAMP can satisfy all the competing demands that I outlined earlier, and planning for additional infrastructure has been occurring in parallel with the WAMP process.

It appears that the best future option is a dam on the Walsh River, north of Dimbulah. The Nullinga dam is the proposed solution to add to our water storage, and I understand that it will be economically viable. It is ideally located to provide for the irrigators' needs so as to free up the Barron River waters for other uses, particularly future urban water supply for the Cairns region, which is the fastest growing area outside the south-east corner. This dam will not have the same environmental and cultural impacts as a dam on Flaggy Creek, close to the Wet Tropics World Heritage area and the Mona Mona Aboriginal community. Whilst detailed studies will obviously be required on the Nullinga dam proposal, I believe we know enough already to purchase the land so as to secure this future water storage option.

Radical reform of the system of water allocation and use in Queensland to meet our national and international obligations for ecologically sustainable use of water resources was never going to be easy. For some people, it will be painful, but history will judge us by our actions now, and future generations will thank us, I am sure. We know from bitter experience what happens to river systems that get exploited and abused. We know the billions it will cost to repair them. Ignorance can no longer be used as an excuse for a lack of action, and I commend the Minister for his courage and commitment to present this reform agenda for the benefit of all Queenslanders. I support the Bill.
