



Speech by

Mr M. ROWELL

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

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WATER BILL

Mr ROWELL (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (5.18 p.m.): In joining this debate on the Water Bill, I want to say that water is an extremely important commodity for Queensland, which is a very big area of very dry land. Therefore, the need to conserve water and use it sparingly is very important. A major requirement for water retention is that there is cost sharing between those people who are involved at the pump head. I do not think that this Bill pays enough regard to that issue, because those people who use the water from the dams are the ones who pay for the cost of that water. Yet the benefits flow to a number of people right across-the-board.

Many towns throughout Queensland are dependent on water. Benefits flow also to businesses that service those areas. I have a letter from Jones Air, which is extremely concerned. It states—

"Our family business was started in St George by our parents in 1974. Five years ago we employed five people. Today, we employ up to forty people and have an annual wages bill of one and a half million dollars."

That is an example of some of the spin-offs. There are also benefits for people who supply chemicals and so on to the agriculture industry. The agriculture industry employs not only primary producers but also many suppliers throughout the towns of Queensland who are so important to agricultural industries. If there were no dams in those areas, there would be little if anything in those places, just as there was 30 and 40 years ago.

The work involved in putting this whole process together will be horrendous. The transition process will require a major effort. I have assisted people to lodge water applications, and I know that the process takes some time. At present, the staff of DNR are stretched and would have immense difficulty in dealing with the burden imposed on them by this Bill.

Drought conditions can be ameliorated with water supplies. If the areas west of Toowoomba had additional dam capacities, they could be assisted greatly through this time of drought. Some farmers have been able to keep their dairy herds alive by pumping water from underground bores. Large storages would lead to major improvements. Water storage is extremely important to those people. I have seen the work being carried out by people in the cotton industry in the Dalby area. They have built dams to trap overland flows. They now grow crops that could not have been grown in those areas years ago. There are obvious benefits in trapping overland flows and using them for irrigating cotton crops.

We should also look at the reuse of treated effluent from Luggage Point. There could be major benefits for the Lockyer Valley and areas further west from using that water, which at the moment is just being pumped out to sea. If we treated that water to a safe level and used it for irrigation, that would provide greater security for those areas.

In the area that I represent, and to the south and the north of it, dams such as the Burdekin Falls Dam have been built. That dam is responsible for very big tonnages of sugarcane being grown in that region. Were it not for the Burdekin Falls Dam the underground supplies would have dwindled to the extent that only a quarter of the amount of sugarcane being grown in the Burdekin region at present would have been produced.

There is a lot of interest in the Elliot Main Channel proposal, which would have many benefits. We have to have projects such as that. The project executive summary states—

"The Elliot Main Channel is an irrigation channel running for 12.7 Km from the Burdekin River near Clare through the Leichhardt Section of the Burdekin River Irrigation Area. It is proposed to extend the Elliot Main Channel an additional 117 Km along the coastal plains to the Don River at Bowen.

With an estimated construction cost of \$178.5 million, the Elliot Main Channel extension ... will provide 223,000 Megalitres per annum of irrigation water from the Burdekin River to areas at Inkerman (3750 hectares), Molongle (5600 ha), Salisbury Plains (5500 ha) and Bowen (11,640 ha). A total of 26,480 hectares ...

The estimated gross value of production generated by the proposed Elliot Main Channel irrigation area is \$184 million per annum, giving a total Net Present Value over 30 years of \$982.7 million."

That is an enormous amount of money. If the Elliot channel is built, the opportunities created will be considerable.

And then there is the Urannah dam proposal. The project executive summary for the Urannah dam states—

"The proposed Urannah Dam site is located in the upper Broken River Valley South East of Collinsville in the Bowen Shire. Identified as a Category 1 project by the Water Infrastructure Task Force, and a Priority 1 project in the Mackay Water Resources Strategy, Urannah Dam would facilitate the development of a 20,000 ha irrigated agricultural zone around Collinsville in the Bowen Shire.

With a development cost of \$150 million ... Urannah Dam would store 1,500,000 ML of water. With a provisional Net Present Value of agriculture production alone of \$564.8 million, Urannah Dam will also meet the future water needs of the Northern Bowen Basin Coal Industry and Collinsville Power Station (value of non-agricultural water use not included in NPV).

The Mackay Regional Water Resources Strategy estimated the Net Present Value of the Urannah Dam (including non-agricultural water use) at \$1056 million with employment creation of in excess of 6000 jobs ..."

Those projects are extremely important. In the Bowen region, trickle irrigation is used extensively. They have got water use down to a fine art. If water were stored and brought into the Bowen region we would see increases in sugarcane and horticultural crop production, and it would be a major boon not only for the agricultural industries in that region but also the mining industry, because water is critical to the mining industry.

The Tinaroo Falls Dam was built some time ago expressly for the use of the tobacco industry. Mangoes, limes, lychees, avocados and also sugarcane are now produced in that area. The problem is that, with crops such as sugar being grown, there is a high demand during the early summer period of the year in particular. The dam's levels five years ago, before major crops such as sugar were being grown, got down to about 30% of capacity. There is a very high demand for water for the sugar crop during the January/February period, particularly if the weather is dry.

The Nullinga dam project on the Walsh River is interesting. It, too, would provide considerable economic benefits for the area. Something like 2,070 hectares of land would be submerged as a result of its construction. The estimated cost is around \$113m. There has been consideration of environmental issues with respect to Nullinga. It does not appear to have any problems. The dam would reduce the pressure on Tinaroo and would have some major benefits for Cairns, which will require additional water as the city grows. There would be increased hydro generation capacity through the Barron River Falls at Kuranda. Generally, it would improve the environmental flow of the Barron River. The estimated range of the capacity of the dam is between 63 million litres to 80 million litres. Although the last figure might be optimistic, it certainly does give a true indication that a considerable amount of water could be stored there. The capacity for irrigation is about 8,320 hectares. Those dam proposals are important for north Queensland and need to be considered.

Turning to other areas, of course we could also have some diversion of water from the North Johnstone River into Tinaroo. That could be a major benefit for that dam. That has been looked at over a period, but no firm decision has been made.

I would like to talk briefly about drainage. While Queensland is a State that for the most part is short of water, there is a major need for drains, particularly in the wet tropical areas of north Queensland. A SIIP package was put together back in about 1994. We are still waiting for that work to be carried out. It is extremely disappointing to many farmers that over the past three years they have had to bear the brunt of cyclones, but they have not been able to see those projects come to fruition. If that does not occur shortly and if we continue to have these extremely wet years, I think some of them will go out of business. There has been consideration of acid sulfate soils, but I have seen crazy things, such as taking drains as long as two kilometres through private property to avoid going through fish habitat areas, which would have negated the need to travel such a long distance.

I also want to talk about the importance of the retention of water in relation to agriculture because there are some definite commercial prospects. I know that in relation to the Walkamin establishment up on the tablelands, the coalition developed something like 24 multipurpose ponds, which made a total of 42 ponds altogether, for experimental fresh water research. A range of fish and crustaceans have been considered in that area—fish such as sleepy cod, barra eels and all those types of things. Recreational fishing and other activities in dams and impoundments are extremely important because dams in the inland provide a unique range of opportunities for people living in the areas away from the coast. The Fairbairn Dam is just a typical example of that.

Twenty-five or 30 years ago when that dam was built there was virtually nothing there. What we have now is a great area for recreation and for people to be able to go and enjoy water sports—skiing and all those types of things—and the dam is also stocked with fish. They are the sorts of things that we need to look at in the future for inland areas where water storages potentially could be built, which would benefit a number of the towns that otherwise would not have the opportunity to enjoy those sorts of lifestyles.

It is also important for job opportunities. It is important for the diversification of the State. I think that if we did not have the water in a lot of those western areas, we would not have the infrastructure that has been put in place. We are seeing major benefits as far as irrigation is concerned. We are seeing crops that we never thought would be grown. We are growing grapes and those sorts of things around the Emerald area. Those sorts of crops would not have been grown without water. Of course, the flow-on effects from those crops to many of the towns are quite considerable.

I think the member for Keppel would remember back 20 to 30 years ago in the days when Emerald was a very small, backyard town, for want of a better expression.

Mr Seeney: Railway camp.

Mr ROWELL: A railway town is probably what it was all about.

Mr Lester: Three thousand five hundred people then; about 12,000 now.

Mr ROWELL: It has grown enormously over the past 20 years or so. I think that clearly demonstrates what can happen when commonsense prevails and where good judgment is used when building dams. I have spoken of a number of dams on the tablelands and certainly in the Bowen region. That region is desperate for additional water. If we can provide those areas with additional water, I think we will see major growth occurring there.

In the Bill there is talk of compensation not being all that forthcoming for those people who are going to lose their entitlements. There is no compensation—

An Opposition member interjected.

Mr ROWELL: Very little compensation is the word. I think it is non-existent. If people are ever going to get anything out of it, they must go through a very lengthy and very arduous process. People who spend a lot of money in developing properties but then are not entitled to the level of water which they anticipated and on which they based their whole strategy and their projected income very often employ a considerable number of people. Those jobs would be put at risk if they had to decide at some stage what to do about a reduced supply. Because of their absolute dependency on water, they may have nowhere to go; they may even have to close down the enterprise because of the lack of water, and it will be almost impossible to gain compensation. That is one of the disappointing parts of this legislation.

I would also like to talk about tradeable water rights, particularly in many of the irrigation schemes. Honourable members can look at the Tinaroo area, where there are water channels going all over the countryside. If there was any tradeable right that took away the prospects of a channel being viable in the future and it was loaded into another area, that would make the whole of that region difficult to operate. Whether it is the people who are involved in the pumping of the water onto their land or the administration of the whole process—and bear in mind that a certain amount of work has to be done on these channels—it is quite costly. If we reach the point at which those channels are not maintained or if they are maintained and that maintenance is very expensive, that certainly will not bode well for the development of that area or the sustainability of that particular region where crops are being grown. While we talk about tradeable rights, I hope only that it is not going to be detrimental to many areas. I nominate the Tinaroo area because I know that people up there are extremely concerned about it.

There probably needs to be a water resources tribunal to adjudicate on appeals by property holders who have been affected by this whole process. I think that is lacking in the Bill. It is something that certainly is needed. I do not think that the Minister has given enough recognition to the fact that people can have considerable problems with the process in terms of where they end up in relation to their entitlements because, as I said, those entitlements are so important to them. If they do not retain them, they can virtually close up, which makes it very difficult for the people they have employed and

for the town that depends on their business. If this did occur, we would see a gradual winding down of some of the country areas of Queensland.

I also think there needs to be a unit within DNR responsible for the water resources planning for the future. We cannot simply go ahead and have the bureaucracy doing this work. I think it has to be done in conjunction with the people to whom it really means a lot. When we look at stream flows, environmental considerations and all that sort of thing, which I know the Minister is very keen on, I do not think that we need to be going overboard.

Time expired.
