



Speech by

Hon. RUSSELL COOPER

MEMBER FOR CROWS NEST

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WATER BILL

Hon. T. R. COOPER (Crows Nest—NPA) (5.02 p.m.): I, too, wish to make a contribution to the debate on the Water Bill. Most people in this House realise the importance of water, and members who have spoken during this debate have stressed that point. Its importance is emphasised very clearly by the drought that has been and is still causing enormous problems for the Brisbane Valley, the Lockyer Valley and the Darling Downs on and off for about nine years. There has been a bit of relief here and there. That drought epitomises the need to ensure the proper use of water and the necessity to regard it as an extremely precious commodity.

Most members have said that there is a very limited water supply in this country. A lot of water has been misused over the years, and a lot of people have learned the lessons of that misuse. I want to commend the speech by the member for Toowoomba South, because I believe he hit the nail on the head in terms of the causes and effects on the Darling Downs of the lack of water. I echo his comments about the Lockyer Valley and the Brisbane Valley, which encompass a fair bit of the electorate of Crows Nest. In all of those areas a need for security of supply has existed for many years. Security of supply is the point that has been missed by Government members. I think that is tragic.

The member for Toowoomba South spelt out clearly the very real effects of lack of water security on the productive sector in Toowoomba. He mentioned the effect of deregulation of the dairy industry, brought about by National Competition Policy. Now we have another change brought about by National Competition Policy that is being proceeded with regardless, rather than the Government listening to those who will be affected: the users and the people who will have that security taken away. That is where the legislation is wrong. No-one denies the need for proper controls over a very limited supply of water, but those controls have to be fair and equitable.

Dirranbandi was mentioned. It is an interesting place to visit. Not so many years ago, the people in the area relied on wool production, and they were, in the main, going broke. I knew some people out there who were on their uppers. It was quite surprising when I went there last year to see how they had transformed their country and their productivity. They had gone from despair to hope. The wool industry, as I said, was finished, and they were finished. I said to one of them in particular, "You were broke three years ago. How on earth would you get the money—nearly \$1m—to put into your water conservation plan, your irrigation plan, to now grow cotton?" He said, "I was totally finished. I was about to walk off." The bank financed him totally into the water conservation program and system that he has installed on his place. It is a brilliant scheme. His first crop of cotton was in the ground and he was ready to rock and roll. He has been going well in only one or two years, which illustrates the difference if one can make that change. Two enterprises will lose under this legislation. The producer to whom I referred will lose, because under this legislation he will lose 80% of his water security. So that finishes him off. The second loser is the bank, which put up the money.

It is great to witness the productivity of the people of the Dirranbandi area. Their numbers are multiplying tremendously. If you go out there now you cannot get accommodation, which is great. Once upon a time you could buy any house in town. Now houses are at a premium, and the number of employees out there is incredible. Last year I travelled there with the shadow Minister. We witnessed a massive transformation, not just in cotton but in grape growing and melons and every other thing you can grow with sufficient water. Those people are using it very effectively and efficiently. When those

people tell their stories and you know what they have been through and you realise the levels of productivity that will be lost and the employment opportunities that will be lost, it is a great shame, and all for what?

We are letting this so-called excess water—the water that is being removed for the Darling Downs, the Upper Condamine and Dirranbandi—run down to New South Wales and South Australia, just because they have been belly-aching about a shortage of supply, just because they have made an utter mess of their irrigation programs over many, many years. They got started first, and they are the ones who made a mess of it. They are the ones who have created adverse salinity effects. They are the ones who cleared the timber and everything else long, long ago. Why should we have to suffer for their mistakes? Are we suckers enough to listen to those people down there, who should put their own house in order? I think they are starting to do so, but nevertheless, for our own people—who have legitimately gone about implementing irrigation schemes and water conservation schemes—to have their water allocations taken away is wrong. It is wrong morally and wrong in law. That is the sort of issue that the Minister will have to address, and we will certainly address it, because that is something we cannot allow to happen. It is too frightening for words.

The member for Toowoomba South also mentioned the attempts to recycle the waste water flowing from Luggage Point into the bay. A lot has been said about it, a lot of planning has been done and a lot of work has been put into it, certainly by the potential users of that 160,000 megalitres of water. The aim is to change that position, based on two factors. The first is the damage it is doing to Moreton Bay. The second is the fact that that water is being wasted when it could be turned into a productive supply for the Lockyer. While it will be expensive to take that water up to the Darling Downs, we have to do a full feasibility study with everyone involved: State, Federal, local government and the users themselves. We are not looking at one year and saying, "Well, it will be terribly expensive; therefore, we can't do it." We are looking at a supply for the next 50 or 100 years. We have to have a bit of vision about this in order to provide water to people who will need it, not just for their own use but for the productivity that goes with it. Being a dry continent as we are, we have to look at ways and means of solving those problems. If we have an asset that is running out into Moreton Bay and being wasted, why not do the sums to see just how much it would cost per megalitre to redirect it for use on the Darling Downs or in the Lockyer Valley? We need some leadership on that issue. As I said, a lot of work has been done, but it needs to be progressed.

Lord Mayor Soorley and Mayor Dianne Thorley in Toowoomba have recognised that a window of opportunity exists in this respect over the next 12 or 18 months. We would be very neglectful if we did not take advantage of that opportunity and use that water productively. Earlier, the member for Sandgate was wondering where the water is to come from. Here is one area from which it can come. We need a positive attitude, not negative knocking of a proposal such as this.

I also mention the Richmond Shire. It has a plan to follow Dirranbandi's example. Once the EIS has been done and the necessary approvals obtained, that would transform that particular part of the north-west of the State. Again, it takes some vision and a bit of leadership to be able to make sure that those proposals, having passed all the necessary tests, proceed. That is something that we should not be knocking and being negative about. We should be making sure that those things actually happen.

I endorse the comments of those who have said that there is a need for a smarter use of water. We should learn from the mistakes we have made over the past 50 or 80 years. In many respects there has been a wastage of water. Once the cost of that wastage is tallied, people tend to realise it is far better to get smart and use smarter techniques. Those techniques are around. What is required is not legislation to force people into using smarter techniques but education to prove that those smarter techniques can result in increased production at less cost. As an example of such water wastage, in some rural areas at midday or 1 o'clock in conditions of howling winds I have seen some irrigation systems blowing water anywhere but onto the soil. We know that that happens in certain cases. There is not a lot of wastage, but we have to recognise that every little drop is precious. Therefore, every little drop should be used as productively as possible. It is a case of using less to produce more. That would also lower irrigation costs.

I again reiterate my concern regarding the consultation process. I know a lot of consultation has taken place. The member for Sandgate mentioned that delays occurred when the Borbidge Government was in power for two and a quarter years. Those problems have existed for something approximating 50 years, so I do not think he can blame any particular Government at any particular time. The fact is that there is a problem and it is a problem that we all recognise has to be fixed. We also recognise how difficult it is to fix such a problem. We all knew that one day we would somehow have to come to grips with this issue. In the process of coming to grips with this issue, as we now are, it is very timely to recognise the people who will be adversely affected by it. Those people are the users, the people who have the knowledge and expertise to be able to give advice. We must be able to secure the supplies for those people who have their systems in place. That is absolutely vital.

I notice that there are approximately 148 amendments to this Bill and they will take some working through. It is a massive number of amendments. The Minister should have considered withdrawing this Bill and presenting a new one. If he had done so, we would probably have a better chance of understanding what those amendments are about.

I want to deal with some of the other matters contained in the Bill. Before I do that, I reiterate that security of supply is necessary. The Buaraba Landcare group in the Brisbane Valley has for years tried to get water via a pipeline from the Wivenhoe Dam to supply the 150 irrigators in that area with a secure supply of water. Atkinsons Dam is not really of good construction and with a pipeline from Wivenhoe would result in increased productivity. We must remember that that area is the salad bowl of south-east Queensland. It must have a supply of water and that is one way of doing it.

As far as the issue of future water allocation is concerned, I notice that the QFF, the Queensland Farmers Federation, and the Queensland Irrigators Council are very concerned. There has been insufficient consideration given to future allocations in the water allocation and management planning process to date. They would not say that without cause. They are very responsible people and are obviously very concerned. If they say that, then there is a problem.

We see that this Bill now provides scope for further water allocation for development identified in a water resources plan. The plan should also address needs, priorities and mechanisms for the use of that water. I ask the Minister to take these things into account during the course of the implementation of this legislation, because if we are to pass this Bill we have to make an enormous effort to get the detail and the workings right. The issue of compensation has been mentioned and we know that there is no provision for compensation. It is only when a problem arises during the formation of a particular WAMP that compensation will be considered.

I note that there is not much detail of the trading rules. They will be spelt out in the regulations. I believe that they will create extensive interest. As far as the tradable water entitlements are concerned, the Minister has informed me that they will be reflective of the local catchment areas. We will wait with interest to see how those regulations work.

In relation to the right of appeal, we notice that there is virtually no right of appeal. That has also concerned the QIC and the QFF and they have spelled that out very clearly. A provision giving people the right of appeal will not create enormous problems. In most legislative situations the right of appeal exists. People have an appeal right about the valuation of land. So these people, too, should have an effective right of appeal, because grievances may arise that need to be sorted out.

The issue of water can cause wars, so it can certainly cause severe grievances between neighbours. Solving those problems often requires the wisdom of Solomon, but once we know the problems are there, we must have mechanisms by which we can achieve fairness and equity. That is really what we are looking at. We have the issue of overland flows. The industry groups that I have mentioned have not advocated the regulation of overland flow but have generally accepted the fact that they have to go along with the proposal at this stage. What the QFF has sought, and I reiterate this on its behalf, is to ensure that regulation would take place only in defined areas where there is a risk that overland flow development will impact on the use of water for pastoral and agricultural purposes and it is confident that this is the case under the Bill.

A three-stage approach is proposed: no controls of overland flows, which would be across the majority of the State; voluntary guidelines, where the community indicates there is a problem that needs to be addressed on a self-regulatory basis; and regulation in those areas where there is a serious problem, where there is real concern about the growth in demand for access to overland flows.

I appeal to the Government on behalf of those people who, as usual, will be the bunnies or the guineapigs—I hope that they are not—because this is such a serious matter. We have heard about the detrimental effect on productivity, the detrimental effect on the livelihoods of business people and their employees and the detrimental effect on productivity. The member for Sandgate made some fairly valid points. He was advocating an ability to come to grips with major problems such as this. It is once he gets on to that type of rhetoric that we hear from people such as Imogen Zethoven who do not know the practicalities of what they are talking about. It is all very well in theory to make those statements, but when we get to the practical end and see the effect of this legislation on the people who will be affected by this, we must listen to those people just as much as we do to the theorists, because the theorists can end up having an enormously detrimental effect on this State, its people and their livelihoods. That is totally unacceptable, and I definitely feel for those people.

The Opposition and other people from all walks of life who have an interest in water—its usage and the vision that we need to have for water provision—will follow this Bill very closely all the way through its implementation and beyond. The coalition will have a lot of work to do in finetuning this legislation when it is implemented. As I say, it is our duty and responsibility to those people who are going to be severely and adversely affected by this legislation to do that.

I will mention just briefly the artesian system, which is something that is very dear to my heart, having had a lot to do with it over the years. The State and Federal Governments and the users should try to get the artesian system back to at least a level at which it will not be depleted. Once upon a time when that scheme first came into play, the aim was that, by the year 2000, the artesian system would be levelled off. However, that has not come to pass. It all comes back to funding—whether the State Government or the Federal Government decides to fund it or not to fund it—as to whether or not that scheme can be implemented on a continuing basis. It has got off to a good start. The focus has been on the main large bores, and that is good. However, because of the water wastage and the need to get that artesian basin back to where it was the scheme has to be continued right across-the-board to all of those bores that are not controlled at present. I believe that we are on the right tram as long as Governments recognise the need for and the importance of that particular scheme.

We are about the conservation of water; we are about the sensible and efficient use of water. We are against the wastage of water. We need to make sure that we use every weapon at our disposal to guard against the wastage of water. As we know, water is paramount to this State and this nation.
