



Speech by

JEFF SEENEY

MEMBER FOR CALLIDE

Hansard 29 May 2001

WATER INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT [BURNETT BASIN] BILL

Mr SEENEY (Callide—NPA) (3.48 p.m.): As the minister said in his second reading speech, the Water Infrastructure Development (Burnett Basin) Bill has been introduced to fast-track the feasibility of new water infrastructure development in the Burnett basin. Much of that Burnett basin falls within the electorate of Callide. Therefore, this bill has specific interest to me. I say at the outset that, like the shadow minister, I will certainly support any initiative that leads towards the development of this type of water infrastructure, especially in the electorate I represent.

As I have said in this House many times before, there are many communities within the Burnett basin that are in critical need of the type of economic development that comes with irrigation development and the building of water infrastructure. This project is of particular importance to a range of small communities throughout the Burnett basin. While the main focus of the debate will understandably relate to the lower end of the Burnett with its horticultural and canegrowing development, the whole issue of irrigation development in the Burnett basin has to be addressed as a single issue. I know that it is being addressed in that way, but it is critically important that equity be maintained across the whole Burnett catchment. It is critically important for the small communities, such as Mundubbera, Gayndah, Murgon, Eidsvold and Monto, that sufficient water allocation be made in the upper reaches of the Burnett catchment as well as from the major storages further down the catchment to those areas in the delta and around Bundaberg itself.

Specifically, the proposed major water infrastructure on the Burnett River, which has become known as Paradise dam, and the Eidsvold and Barlil Weirs and the upgrade of the Jones and Walla Weirs will be progressed by this legislation, or so the minister claims in his second reading speech. I have nothing but support for anything that will progress any of those projects.

The bill was introduced by the minister with the claim that it would allow a quick but thorough investigation of the feasibility of the water infrastructure development. The water infrastructure development in the Burnett basin has been under investigation for too long. I note that the member for Bundaberg finds that amusing. For as long as I have been a member in this place I have put forward the view that the previous Minister for Natural Resources used the excuse about the need for ongoing thorough investigation as a means of delaying an actual start to the provision of physical infrastructure.

I hope that the Minister for State Development is genuine in what he says in his second reading speech and I hope that he is genuine in what he says about the reasons for this bill being in this parliament this afternoon, because that infrastructure needs to be progressed. We do not need any more delay. We do not need any more procrastination. The people of the Burnett Valley, from Monto in the north through to Bargara on the coast, want to see this type of development proceed. There have been sufficient studies done, I believe, to establish the parameters within which that development can occur while preserving the features of the natural environment that we all want to see preserved.

This particular piece of legislation will hopefully achieve this by allowing the state to take responsibility for the environmental impact statement process in respect of the water infrastructure component of the Bundaberg 2000 project. The minister said in his second reading speech that development rights for the water infrastructure would be awarded through a competitive process. B2K has already been declared a significant project under the State Development and Public Works Organisation Act, and terms of reference for the B2K proposal have been finalised in accordance with the requirements of the act.

The government claims that the bill will allow the state, through the state owned company, to assume responsibility for the EIS process without the need to duplicate processes already undertaken as part of B2K. The impact assessment relating to the Eidsvold and Barlil Weirs and the upgrade to the existing Jones Weir will also be undertaken by the state but under separate assessment processes, as the Jones and Barlil Weirs are already well advanced.

One of the major ways the bill will allow the state to speed up the feasibility process is by removing an avenue of public consultation, specifically the requirement that the proponent of the new water infrastructure first attempt to negotiate land access with the affected land-holders. The government claims that the affected land-holders will still be consulted because the Coordinator-General will still be required to consult with the land-holders prior to deciding an application for access to investigate the site.

The government also claims that this removal of the requirement to negotiate will be limited because it only applies to an application by the state concerning the specified water infrastructure option and because it will expire, along with the rest of the bill, in accordance with the bill's sunset clause on 31 December 2004. I sincerely hope that by 31 December 2004 some of this infrastructure is operational. It has also been claimed that in practice the state will seek to negotiate entry before seeking authority under this provision of the bill.

The Queensland Nationals absolutely support the need for further sustainable development of new water infrastructure in the Burnett system. Despite all the claims and assurances, we are still being asked to trust the government to do the right thing by the landowners who will be affected by the construction of these works. That raises obvious questions as to whether in fact this government can be trusted. Based on its track record, we would have to have doubts.

Only two weeks ago we witnessed this glib 'trust me, I'm from the government' response when the Minister for Primary Industries introduced the fisheries bill for debate with the assurance that there had been consultation and there would be more consultation before the substantial powers in that bill could be exercised. Strangely enough, or perhaps not so strangely, the commercial fishermen concerned reported that this was not the case and have in fact requested that the bill be repealed. That is one example of this government's track record when it comes to consultation.

The Scrutiny of Legislation Committee also raised concern in its *Alert Digest* of today's date in relation to the waiving of the requirement to consult. The committee sought further information from the minister but, due to the fact that this bill has been rushed to the top of the *Notice Paper* for debate today, no such information has been provided. Perhaps the minister may like to address that when he replies to the second reading debate.

One of the issues raised was the fact that it is not clear whether the state owned company that will take carriage of the EIS is already in existence or what form that company is going to take. I ask the minister now: is this company in place and what is the rationale behind the establishment of a separate company? I understand that it is not in place and that the rationale for the establishment of the company is far from clear, both within and outside the government. Perhaps the minister could enlighten the parliament and his government's departments when he sums up at the end of this second reading debate.

Why can the government not take control of the project itself in the traditional way? Why is it necessary to establish a company? Who will sit on the board of the company? Will this company do the feasibility studies as well as the EIS? Will it call tenders for projects and for the construction of these works? Will this new water infrastructure be privatised? Will it be privately owned? Will it be privately managed? Will it be privately controlled? These are some of the questions I would like the minister to address in his reply to this debate.

There is enormous confusion within government and between the Department of State Development, which seems to have assumed responsibility for water infrastructure, and the Department of Natural Resources, which has historically had carriage of water resources issues. We have the ridiculous situation where DNR and DSD are now brawling between themselves over the development of the Burnett basin. There are arguments about how best to achieve that development and how to fulfil the Premier's 2001 election commitment to build the Paradise dam or its equivalent.

That confusion was probably the result of the ministers in the previous government. I contend that the then Minister for Natural Resources certainly took a very different view from the view taken by the then Minister for State Development. I hope that the Minister for State Development in this government has the cooperation of the Minister for Natural Resources. The minister has indicated that he does, and I certainly hope, quite genuinely, that he has better cooperation from the current Minister for Natural Resources than his predecessor had from the previous Minister for Natural Resources.

That is the reason this whole question of water infrastructure in the Burnett basin has not proceeded to anywhere near the extent that the people who live locally in that area would have liked. That is the reason behind it, and I am pleased that the minister has been able to indicate that he has

the support of the Minister for Natural Resources, because it will be important for the minister who has carriage of this project to have that support if he is to have any chance of bringing these projects to fulfilment.

Confusion between departmental roles is not confined to the Burnett catchment. It extends across every facet of water resource management and water resource development in the state. That confusion is not confined to government circles. Industry and the private sector are struggling to identify what the government's policy is and what role they are expected to play. I believe that the bulk of this confusion can be attributed directly to the fact that this Beattie government does not have a clear policy on water or, more specifically, new water infrastructure development. There is no clear policy. In fact, it does not have a policy at all.

Labor took no policy to the election that related to water infrastructure development and it has no policy now. While that situation remains, development in this state will continue to be stifled. Job creation will continue to be stifled and rural and regional development will continue to be stifled across a range of rural and regional communities.

This is a government that is going round and round in circles like a rudderless boat on the issue of water infrastructure. The Scrutiny of Legislation Committee also raised the issue of the removal of consultation provisions in this bill and referred to parliament the question of whether the Coordinator-General's existing authority to consult with land-holders has sufficient regard for landowners' rights. On that issue, it is worth making the point as to why the Beattie government has dragged its feet on the development of new water infrastructure in the Burnett to the point where it now deems it necessary to rush this bill into the House and remove a provision for community consultation in order to, as claimed, fast-track that development.

Let us not forget the Premier's promise in the run-up to the 1998 state election to match the then coalition's commitment to construct the Paradise dam within five years. What happened to that promise that the Premier made with such fanfare during the election campaign when the now member for Bundaberg was first endorsed and when she was the then Mayor of Bundaberg? I well remember the media articles that appeared locally when the Premier went up there and, in conjunction with the local mayor, made quite firm and detailed promises. What happened? The promise was broken! This is an ongoing source of embarrassment to the member for Bundaberg. And the member for Bundaberg can be assured that, while ever she sits in this House, I will continue to remind her of the promises and the part that she played when those promises were made.

As I said, that promise has been broken. We are now well into 2001 and, despite this bill, the Beattie government will not fulfil its promise to the people of Bundaberg and the surrounding community to have that done in five years. If the Premier had been serious about honouring his promise, we would not now be rushing legislation through the parliament and we would be seeing that major infrastructure well into its physical completion. All the feasibility studies would have been done in a proper fashion, and construction would now be well under way. But the promise that the Premier made has been broken, and this will continue to be an ongoing embarrassment to the member for Bundaberg.

But let us remember the role of the then Minister for Natural Resources—the now Attorney-General. He sat on his hands for nearly three years, developing the same sort of pressure sores as those to which my colleague the member for Southern Downs referred when speaking about the previous Attorney-General and his refusal to introduce proceeds of crime forfeiture legislation, and the same sort of pressure sores that Mr Welford developed from sitting on his hands for two years over the Fraser Island dingo management report.

Why did the Beattie government not act on the previous Borbidge government's approval in May 1998 for the raising of the Walla Weir stage 2, the Bucca Weir and the Jones Weir? The Jones Weir is particularly important to the Mundubbera community. The raising of the Jones Weir was almost set to go when the Beattie government came to office. I am reliably informed that tenders would have been called had it not been for the caretaker period before the election. The community of Mundubbera is still waiting for that project. It is good to see that that weir is part of this bill, and it is good to hear the minister giving assurances in the House that this bill will bring forward that development. We support that. But the point is that it should have been done years ago, and we should have been a lot further ahead than we are now. There is no denying that, there is no denying the promises that were made by the Premier and the member for Bundaberg, and there is no denying that those promises have been and will continue to be broken.

What about the freeze that was put on those projects when the Beattie government first came to power and the now Attorney-General was the then Minister for Natural Resources? Not one new water project that was not started or commissioned by the former coalition government has seen the light of day under the Beattie government—not one. That is why I say to the minister that, while we support this legislation and the types of things that the minister has said in justifying this legislation to the House, it will be gratifying to see him deliver something real, because the record of his government

and the record of his predecessors is not good; in fact, it is totally nonexistent. They have not delivered any infrastructure at all. So it will be interesting to see whether or not there is any meaningful substance behind the minister's rhetoric when introducing this legislation to the parliament. I hope there is. I hope I can stand up here in two years time—or however long it might take—and congratulate him on having this sort of infrastructure in place. But let me tell him candidly that I have my doubts. The minister's record is not good.

As I stated earlier, the Queensland Nationals are strongly supportive of sustainable new water infrastructure development in the Burnett basin. We are strongly supportive of that and always have been. But unlike the Labor Party, our commitment at the last election was rock solid; it was not dependent on the B2K project, and it was not bound to the establishment of some mysterious state owned company. We recognise the need for further water supplies in the Burnett region to help the area capitalise on the enormous opportunity to further develop its sugar, fruit and vegetable and associated industries and to create the jobs that the area so badly needs. The second major difference between the Queensland Nationals' position and the position of the Labor government is that we will enshrine in law farmers' water access rights, as well as giving those water users the opportunity to decide how best to manage that resource.

Enormous uncertainty is escalating because the Beattie government continues to duck this issue and continues to allow its corporatised water providers, SunWater and the South East Queensland Water Corporation, to ride roughshod over the interests of water users in this state. Our water policy provides for the establishment of local water boards that would give water users direct input into the management and pricing of water. Labor shuns such community empowerment.

While this bill addresses some of the needs of water development in the Burnett basin, there has been no indication of the government's position or any decision regarding additional water availability in the Kolan, Elliott, Gregory or Isis catchments. The Queensland Nationals are committed to fitting bags to raise the levels of the Walla Weir and the Bucca Weir as soon as practically possible. It has been recognised for many years that the Bucca Weir on the Kolan River would reduce the risk of saltwater intrusion to underground water supplies.

Our commitment also included the provision of additional water storage in the Upper Burnett to ensure a fair distribution of our limited water resources throughout the Burnett catchment. That is critically important to the communities that I represent. There must be equity along the catchment in terms of water allocations. These are the sorts of commitments that the Burnett community is seeking from the Beattie government, as well as some firm commitments and urgent action to construct the proposed Paradise storage.

The Queensland Nationals will be supporting this bill because of our strong commitment to the Burnett region and to providing the sustainable and assured water supplies that the region needs to fulfil its potential. In saying that, I emphasise again that we do have some serious concerns about the Beattie government's broken promises so far and the mechanisms being employed by the government to progress the project. We are concerned about the removal of the requirement for the proponent of the water infrastructure—most likely the state—to negotiate with landowners in the initial stages. We are concerned that the government has no policy with regard to water infrastructure development, and we are concerned that there is no longer any specialist agency within the government with the required expertise to build major dams and other water infrastructure. That group was gutted from the DNR, and the Department of State Development will now have carriage of it—with a distinct lack of success in delivering major infrastructure projects to the state.

We are concerned about the record of this state Labor government in delivering these major water infrastructure projects. We are concerned that it has not been able to do that to date, and we are concerned that this is just another piece of meaningless, endless rhetoric to disguise the fact that it has been able to deliver nothing. But we will support whatever effort is required to make sure that that sort of infrastructure is delivered to the Burnett basin, because it is critically important to the people I represent.

Time expired.
