



Speech by

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NEW SOUTH WALES-QUEENSLAND BORDER RIVERS AMENDMENT BILL

Mr SHINE (Toowoomba North—ALP) (4.30 p.m.): I rise to speak on the New South Wales-Queensland Border Rivers Amendment Bill with some degree of reluctance in the sense that my knowledge of matters to do with water resources generally has been, in the past at least, deficient. However, it is a fascinating topic. I have noticed in my short time in this House that it has generated a great deal of interest, if not heat at times, particularly from members opposite in terms of the obvious effect of what government policy might or might not be in this area.

I realise that my electorate of Toowoomba North, whilst it is a provincial city electorate, does have a very close connection with people on the land. My electorate is near the Border Rivers as well as the Maranoa and the Condamine-Balonne. A lot of people who live in my electorate have interests in or connections with those areas in one way or another. Quite apart from that, I think it behoves all members of this House to take an increasingly more in-depth interest in the questions raised from time to time in these water bills.

Salinity is not a problem just for members who serve electorates out west or down south; it is a national problem. It is a problem that will affect all of us and generations to come. For that reason alone it is worth while members becoming au fait with the issues involved. There are other issues I have recently become aware of—potential problems in relation to water trading, for example, and also the vexing issue of compensation. In my experience, from my former practice as a lawyer, I fear the amount of compensation in court cases cannot be compared with the type of compensation that some might envisage if future actions cannot bring about agreement on a sensible regime. If that is the case and if it is suggested down the track that the government, be it this government or the Commonwealth government, pick up the tab for very vast amounts of compensation, that will become a problem for all members of parliament, whether they represent rural electorates or not.

Because of my lack of experience in this area I was pleased to be able to rely on some material in a research brief, which I found very informative and well done, prepared by the Parliamentary Library. Legislation Bulletin No. 9 of 2000 refers to the original 1946 debates in the House when the first act dealing with the Border Rivers was brought in. I also referred to the information paper referred to earlier by the member for Logan.

The research brief sets out the area occupied by the Border Rivers catchment. It gives a description of the general area of Queensland and New South Wales that is involved. It points out that the area of concern is held in equal proportions by New South Wales and Queensland. The Border Rivers we are talking about are those rivers that actually make up the border between Queensland and New South Wales.

The Border Rivers catchment encompasses three regulated river systems in which the natural stream flow is supplemented by release from government storages or dams. Those three are the Border Rivers regulated system, located on the Severn-Macintyre-Barwon Rivers to Mungindi and supplied jointly from the Glenlyon Dam and the Pindari Dam; the Dumaresq River irrigation project in Queensland, located on the Dumaresq and Macintyre-Barwon Rivers to Mungindi and supplied from the Glenlyon Dam and the Coolmunda Dam; and the Macintyre Brook irrigation project, located on Macintyre Brook and supplied from the Coolmunda Dam. The water resources of the Border Rivers

catchment are used to supply water for irrigation, for industry, for stock watering and for domestic and town water supply.

The original bill introduced in 1946 dealt with an agreement between the governments of New South Wales and Queensland. The act formalised and ratified an agreement reached between the two states. The three elements of the agreement were the construction of certain works, namely weirs and a dam; the establishment of a uniform system of making and recording continuous gaugings of the flow of water in the Border Rivers and their tributaries; and the establishment of the Dumaresq-Barwon Border Rivers Commission to control the construction, operation and maintenance of the works and to facilitate the management of the border streams. As a matter of interest, the Queensland government in 1946 estimated that the cost of construction of the storage dam on the Dumaresq River at that time was one million pounds, and for each weir the cost was 10,000 pounds. I would be interested to find out what the cost would be for the construction of those fairly substantial infrastructure items today.

Two other pieces legislation preceded the bill now before the House. The first was in 1968 as a result of a report of the commission which found in part that the foundation conditions in the vicinity of the Mingoola area made the site an unsuitable one for the construction of a dam as proposed under the agreement and that a smaller dam on Pike Creek should result. That was formulated in the New South Wales-Queensland Border Rivers Amendment Act 1968.

The second and last amendment related to implementing an updated agreement to provide for the management of the ground water resources associated with the Dumaresq and Macintyre-Barwon Rivers to establish investigations into river improvement work to be undertaken. These amendments in 1993 resulted from the concern that the use of ground water and the resulting lowering of the watertable could draw water from the stream into the ground reservoir, thereby depleting stream flows.

In his second reading speech the minister summarised what this bill was all about, which is fairly brief and of itself, from what I can understand, not terribly remarkable.

Mr Robertson: Excuse me?

Mr SHINE: It is not as complex, perhaps, as my perusal of the Water Bill 2000 would indicate.

Mr Springborg: Well, he is learning.

Mr SHINE: I am learning slowly.

As I said, this bill seeks to ratify an agreement between the two states. That agreement concerns the sharing of the water between the Border Rivers and what works are to be carried out from time to time. The agreement has been and will continue to be implemented by the Dumaresq-Barwon Border Rivers Commission. The commission comprises representatives from both governments and it determines the quantity of water and shares it in a proportion between the states.

This bill allows that commission to approve carryover of any part of the unused share of water from year to year. It also provides for a better management and more effective use of water. Of course, this amendment to the agreement has to be ratified by both states. That is why we are dealing with it today.

I said before that I would make reference to the 1946 debate on this issue when the first bill was introduced. But before doing so, I point out that, in Australia, water is—for the reasons I gave earlier—of critical importance. Australia is the driest continent on earth, other than Antarctica, and it has the least amount of water in its rivers and the smallest area of permanent wetlands. No matter what our degree of knowledge was in the past on these matters, we can always learn more. Water is Australia's most valuable natural resource, but it has suffered from relatively rapid clearing of vegetation, inefficient farming practices and inadequate management. It is only in the past decade really that decisive measures have been talked about and/or taken.

An opposition member interjected.

Mr SHINE: Having said that, it is interesting to consider history. Often, if one reflects on what history has told us, we can learn and we can adopt better practices for the future. There are some, I suppose, in this House who do not see much point in looking at history; they know it all. But I am not one of them, I humbly confess.

Mr Springborg interjected.

Mr SHINE: I am pleased that the member for Southern Downs agrees with my view that one can learn from history.

The original bill was introduced by the honourable Arthur Jones, the then minister for public lands. That is interesting in itself. In those days, there was no separate Department of Natural Resources. In fact, there was not even a separate department of irrigation and water supply. That piece of history might be of interest to certain honourable members here today. It was indicative of the approach that our community in Queensland had to water and to these problems at that time.

The minister, when introducing the bill, said—

The main features of the Bill are the setting up of the commission, the distribution of the water in the storage dam and the agreement as to the construction of the necessary works ...

He said—

This proposal will be the first major irrigation project in Queensland.

This is of interest in itself. He said also—

We are satisfied that we have enough land in Queensland to use our share of the water from the main storage.

How things perhaps have changed! The worry seemed to be that we might not be able to deal with the amount of water we had in the storage.

Investigations had been undertaken by that government—which, I might add, was a Labor government in Queensland after the war—into irrigation needs throughout Queensland. However, it was not until 1946 that it was foreshadowed in that speech to parliament by Mr Jones, which I mentioned before, that the concept of setting up a subdepartment of irrigation and water supply was first ventured. He made reference to the building of weirs in the Lockyer, which was a very early attempt at water storage in Queensland. He also made mention of the fact that there were mistakes made in irrigation areas elsewhere in Australia. He referred to disasters in Victoria at a place called Cohuna. And as a result of that, the government of the day in Victoria had to write off considerable amounts of money.

Reference was also made to a previous unsuccessful scheme in the Dawson Valley at Theodore. In fact, Mr Nicklin, who was then the Leader of the Opposition, made reference to the fact that, in 1933, a royal commission had been held to inquire into why that scheme had failed. So because of the past mistakes that were referred to even in those days, it behoves us all now—particularly with the benefit of knowing that background—to be cognisant of the fact that mistakes were made in the past and that we should learn from them.

I would like to make some comments on what I understand is being done now to address these problems. Because of its location, Queensland and New South Wales are conducting a joint flow management process, which is mentioned in the information paper to which I referred earlier. That process is for the whole catchment in conjunction with a panel of stakeholders from both states. The joint planning will result in an interstate agreement that will include provisions for environmental flows and a framework for interstate trading of water entitlements. Queensland is providing technical, planning and administrative support for the joint planning process, including the development of a hydrologic model jointly with New South Wales. The model is being used to simulate and assess stream flows, water infrastructure performance, losses and water use throughout the Border Rivers basin for a number of possible development and management scenarios.

The information paper I referred to earlier provides background information on management systems, water policies, ecological condition and assessments of historical and possible future development scenarios. Detailed technical advice relating to environmental flow requirements of aquatic ecosystems within the catchment is provided by an independent technical advisory panel comprised of environmental scientists with knowledge of riverine systems within the basin. They have produced three reports providing information and assessments on the current ecological condition and processes in the catchment.

Running in parallel to this joint planning process, Queensland is developing a draft water resource plan in consultation with Queensland stakeholders. The Queensland water resource plan will cover water in watercourses, lakes and springs and provide for the establishment of water allocations that will be transferable and separate to the land title and will include the management of overland flows. As support to the Queensland water resource planning, a moratorium on the starting of new works is in place. It applies to both licensed and unlicensed works, including works to take overland flow and off-stream storages that would take water from watercourses. The moratorium provides a firm basis for assessing the impacts of current Queensland development in the catchment.

The water resource planning process is not about penalising communities in the Border Rivers and Condamine-Balonne catchment areas. Rather, it is about ensuring that the water resources that they rely on are protected and preserved well into the future. Water resource planning is an investment in the future viability of these communities. The joint flow management plan will help to protect the rivers that flow from Queensland into New South Wales and ensure the economic viability of surrounding communities. This is an important step in the effective management of the Border Rivers.

I also believe that the solution to the long-term problems must involve communities and local governments. There must be some sort of a partnership between communities and the legislators, including local government. Local government has legislative capacity through the Integrated Planning Act. A group of local governments—for example, EDROC on the downs—has the capacity to take a strategic view.

For total community acceptance of projects or potential legislation, the community must be educated and engaged on a catchment basis. The people currently providing land care and catchment management outcomes need to be mutual and encouraged so that they do not feel alienated in the

new processes. The process needs to be discussed on a community of interest—that is, a subcatchment basis to achieve the total river picture. For a total Queensland Murray-Darling perspective, there are three major river catchments: the Condamine, the Maranoa-Balonne and the Border Rivers. The people concerned must recognise and work in harmony with each other to achieve Queensland's water quality and salinity targets.
