



Speech by

Hon. S. ROBERTSON

MEMBER FOR STRETTON

Hansard 19 June 2001

LAKE EYRE BASIN AGREEMENT BILL

Hon. S. ROBERTSON (Stretton—ALP) (Minister for Natural Resources and Minister for Mines)
(12.32 p.m.): I move—

That the bill be now read a second time.

This bill ratifies the Lake Eyre basin intergovernmental agreement, which provides for the establishment of arrangements for improved coordination in the management of water and related natural resources for the part of the Lake Eyre basin in Queensland and South Australia. The Lake Eyre basin agreement was signed in Birdsville on 21 October 2000 by my predecessor, the Honourable Rod Welford, together with the Honourable Mark Brindal, on behalf of the Queensland and South Australian governments. Senator Robert Hill had signed the agreement previously on behalf of the Commonwealth government.

The Lake Eyre basin covers about one-sixth of Australia with over 50 per cent of the basin lying within Queensland. It is the largest internal drainage system in the world, stretching over 1.14 million kilometres, or about 15 per cent of the Australian continent. There are two main rivers in the basin, the Georgina-Diamantina and the Cooper Creek. The environmental features of the basin include the Coongie Lakes in South Australia, which are classified as wetlands of international importance under the Ramsar convention. These streams are extremely important to the communities, as well as the pastoral and tourism industries of the basin. One of the more important features of these streams is that they are largely unaffected by major water extractions or regulation by dams.

Another feature of the Lake Eyre basin is that its river systems alternate between periods of little or no flood and massive flooding events, as recently witnessed in the basin. This requires a different management approach than that usually applied to coastal rivers, which tend to have more constant flow regimes. The natural variability and the frequency, duration and volume of these flood events is essential for the maintenance of ecological processes in the basin's river systems and associated wetlands. We need to better understand the ecological implications of management decisions affecting these river systems to ensure we avoid making the mistakes now affecting the Murray-Darling basin and other parts of Australia. The Beattie government, in partnership with the South Australian and Commonwealth governments, has a rare opportunity to ensure that the water resources of the basin are managed sustainably, protecting the social, cultural and environmental values of the basin, while providing for its economic values to be maintained and enhanced, where possible.

When it was proposed, some years ago, to grow broadacre cotton using large-scale extractions from Cooper Creek, there was considerable concern in the basin and the broader community over the possible impacts of the proposed development. In response, the Queensland, South Australian and Commonwealth governments considered that there needed to be a framework for coordinated management of issues of basin-wide significance. The agreement was drafted after considerable consultation within the communities of the basin, both before and after a heads of agreement was signed by the three governments in May 1997. It provides for the preparation, and adoption, of policies and strategies for the management of the water and related resources of the basin, which potentially have cross-border impacts. These policies and strategies will be prepared on behalf of a ministerial forum which has been established under the agreement. The members of the forum are the Honourable Mark Brindal, Senator Robert Hill and myself. The forum had its inaugural meeting in Longreach last month. The ministerial forum will develop appropriate policies and strategies for the

sustainable management of the cross-border river systems in the basin in consultation with the basin community.

One of the major outcomes of this meeting was the release of draft policies for community consultation which will provide the basis of strategies designed to protect water quality and river flows within the major cross-border river systems and to maintain ecological integrity of in-stream and flood plain ecosystems. Other outcomes included the appointment of the Lake Eyre Basin Coordinating Group as the community advisory committee with an expanded membership to include a local government representative and the South Australian Arid Areas Catchment Water Management Board. A scientific panel was also established. It will be headed by Professor Peter Cullen of the Cooperative Research Centre for Freshwater Ecology. The panel will provide the forum with scientific advice on matters under the agreement. The forum also agreed on a budget of \$500,000 per annum for implementation of the agreement, including an allocation to the coordinating group to provide secretariat support for the community advisory committee. Costs will be shared, with Queensland and South Australia contributing \$125,000 each per year and the Commonwealth providing \$250,000.

Two features of the Lake Eyre basin agreement are important to note. Firstly, decisions of the forum can only be made by consensus, so Queensland's interests cannot be overridden by the South Australian or Commonwealth members of the forum; and, secondly, implementation of the forum's policies and strategies in Queensland can only be in accordance with our existing legislation.

It is likely that one of the first policies to be adopted by the forum will be the Cooper Creek water management plan, which the government established in February 2000. The agreement provides a pragmatic solution to the problem of managing cross-border flows in a way that meets the aspirations and concerns of all stakeholders in the basin. The Lake Eyre basin intergovernmental agreement requires the ratification of the agreement by the parliaments of South Australia and Queensland. The agreement comes into effect once it has been so approved and ratified. It has already been ratified by both the South Australian and federal parliaments. I commend the bill to the House.
