



Speech by

Hon. S. ROBERTSON

MEMBER FOR STRETTON

Hansard 7 August 2001

LAKE EYRE BASIN AGREEMENT BILL

Hon. S. ROBERTSON (Stretton—ALP) (Minister for Natural Resources and Minister for Mines) (6.18 p.m.), in reply: The Lake Eyre Basin Intergovernmental Agreement was first signed in Birdsville on 21 October 2000 by my predecessor Minister Rod Welford and the South Australian Water Resources Minister Mark Brindal, so comments by the member for Gregory congratulating me on this initiative should really be given to my predecessor, Rod Welford. Senator Robert Hill also signed the agreement previously on behalf of the Commonwealth government.

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. This means finding a balance between protecting its social, cultural and environmental values, whilst maintaining and enhancing its economic values where possible.

The agreement 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. The first ministerial forum addressing the agreement had its inaugural meeting in Longreach in May. One of the major outcomes of this meeting was the release of draft policies for community consultation.

The member for Gregory mentioned that a range of people deserve recognition for the work undertaken in the Lake Eyre basin. I endorse what the member for Gregory had to say. I particularly enjoyed my time at Longreach meeting such characters as Sandy Kidd, who has a unique perspective on not just the history of the development of communities in the Lake Eyre basin but also has perhaps one of the driest senses of humour we would ever come across—probably even drier than the landscape.

The policies we are engaging the community on will form the basis for strategies designed to protect water quality and river flows within the major cross-border river systems and to maintain the 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 advisory panel was also established.

The forum also agreed on cost sharing arrangements to implement the agreement. Two features of the Lake Eyre basin agreement are important to note. Firstly, decisions of the forum can be made only 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. 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.

Like Lake Eyre, the Great Artesian Basin is another one of Australia's most important water resources. In June 2000, the Queensland government signed an agreement with the Commonwealth government to jointly fund, together with land-holder contributions, the Great Artesian Basin Sustainability Initiative—GABSI. 2001-02 state funding for GABSI has been considered as part of the recent budget process. At this stage, it is likely that the Department of Natural Resources and Mines will provide \$2 million in base funding for the initiative in 2001-02. State funding of \$2.4 million was

provided for the initiative and related NHT piping projects in the 2000-01 financial year—a significant investment by the Queensland government. In addition, the government is spending \$1.4 million a year on ongoing management of the basin which is not recognised by the federal government.

That is a matter of great concern to me. I refer again to the comments made by the member for Gregory about the role that NHT funding plays and the difficulties that community organisations have in terms of setting out long-term work plans when NHT funding may provide them secure funding for only one, two or three years. I believe there is significant work to be done by the federal government to provide the certainty and surety that is necessary under such a program as NHT that allows communities to plan in the long term. After all, when we are talking about natural resource management projects we are not talking about projects that can necessarily be fixed in one, two or three years; a lot of these projects are ongoing projects. If they are to be filled to their full potential, that security of funding over the longer term is certainly necessary.

The other thing that is a concern—and I mentioned it just before—is that the federal government does not recognise the additional \$1.4 million a year that the Department of Natural Resources provides for the ongoing management of the basin. If it did acknowledge that level of work and funding that the department provides, Queensland could attract a further \$1.4 million on top of that which could go to on-the-ground works. But that is not to be and, as a result, we have come in for some criticism for that and that is acknowledged. I take this opportunity to call on the federal government to acknowledge the additional funding that the state government does provide to the Lake Eyre basin and come in behind that funding by providing more financial support than it does currently.

The aim of the Great Artesian Basin Sustainability Initiative is to rehabilitate hundreds of outdated, corroding bores and replace some 22,000 kilometres of open bore drains with piped systems throughout the basin. To date, some 404 bores have been capped and 69 piped reticulation schemes have been installed. This has resulted in significant water saving and partial pressure recovery in some key sections of the basin. Stakeholders have been instrumental in ensuring these early program achievements. These key stakeholders include land-holders, mining and tourism representatives, the Great Artesian Basin Advisory and Consultative Councils and the state and Commonwealth governments.

A major issue which was resolved some months ago is the cost-sharing arrangements applying to the Great Artesian Basin Sustainability Initiative. The decision was made to retain the subsidy levels which have applied for a number of years under other funding programs. For bore rehabilitation works, the subsidy is 80 per cent, with land-holders having to cover only 20 per cent of the costs. For piping projects, land-holders pay 40 per cent of the cost of the work conducted on their property and the state and Commonwealth governments share equally the remaining 60 per cent. This may be less than the subsidy of 70 per cent sought by the Chair of the Great Artesian Basin Consultative Council, but it is commensurate with the level of private benefit attached to these projects and has been acceptable to the 300 land-holders who have applied thus far to participate in the initiative.

The Queensland government is committed to doing its share to ensure the future sustainability of both the Great Artesian and Lake Eyre basins, in partnership with other relevant governments and stakeholders. 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.

In commending the bill to the House, I thank the opposition for its support of this bill and thank all honourable members for their contribution to the debate that we have had on this important piece of legislation.
