



Speech by

**Mrs D. PRATT**

**MEMBER FOR NANANGO**

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Hansard 13 May 2003

**WATER AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

**Mrs PRATT** (Nanango—Ind) (8.35 p.m.): I rise to speak to the Water and Other Legislation Amendment Bill which has been put forward by the Beattie government to amend the Water Act 2000, the Land Act 1994, the Land Title Act 1994, the Integrated Planning Act 1997 and the Land Valuation Act 1994. The need for these changes has been identified as partially facilitating the proposed new water infrastructure in the Burnett basin.

The water reform process has been going on for quite some time and there has been an enormous amount of uncertainty surrounding the process. I believe that land-holders are experiencing uncertainty with the river operations plan and the water resource plan and they find it intolerable. It is through the ROPs that tradeable water allocations were established which allow the separation of the value of water from the value of land. Some people have found the separation of the value of water a possible bone of contention in that it might reflect poorly on their property values in the future. The following questions have been asked. What happens when large land-holders buy up smaller properties to obtain their water licences to hoard the water supply? What happens if land-holders, through good land practices, do not utilise their total water allocation? Will that land-holder lose part of his allocation in the future? Once the water allocation has been transferred to another property holder, will this impact negatively in the future on the sale price of his property? When, if ever, will his property be reallocated or permitted to purchase a water licence? At the time that he does that, will he be able to actually afford it?

The ability to trade water has an enormous impact on the future of all land-holders. With it has come serious concerns. The greatest of those is the security of the water entitlement. Under this legislation, water entitlements can be eroded away every 10 years. The concerns of land-holders are justifiable. This uncertainty will dictate how these property owners work their land in the future. Will the fear of losing an allocation or part thereof see water perhaps being used in a less than efficient way? In the future, will opportunities to break into additional irrigation areas become limited? Will it take enormous capital to buy back water allocations?

Recently, real estate and property valuer Bruce Gunning stated that there has been a mad scramble by established cotton growers to buy extra water licences. He stated that, over the past six months, on the New South Wales Border River system the average 972 megalitre licence had increased from \$1 million \$1.7 million. He also stated that if people had money to invest, water is the commodity that was likely to experience the biggest growth over the next five years. I and many others would like to know how the minister will stop this kind of trading now that water is a tradeable commodity?

I have to agree with the member for Lockyer when he stated that it appears that the southern water wasters have squandered their resource and now blame Queensland for their problems. I, too, feel enormous frustration when I travel along the coastal urban fringe and see the enormous amount of water filling the gutters and being wasted. I have watched developers build large urban beehives on huge tracts of land, killing every living thing by bulldozing, with the aim of crowding even greater populations into an already overstretched environment. Whilst all this is going on, urban dwellers are castigating rural land-holders for clearing bush or for their water usage. Talk about the pot calling the kettle black!

Another concern of land-holders is that the onus of proof has been reversed. In this legislation, as in the tree clearing legislation, the land-holders and water users will be forced to prove themselves innocent of water abuse instead of being innocent until proven guilty, as was once the mantra of this country. Over the last few years the government has instilled a lack of trust in property owners through legislation passed, and at every turn land-holders are finding themselves penalised severely in the very business they are endeavouring to run.

Most people realise that water has become a very precious commodity. No-one knows better than the man on the land the devastation of drought, with recent experiences only instilling once again the lesson learned long ago—that is, the need to preserve our water. Farmers do not want to exploit their assets, whether they be land or water, and more often than not look for a sustainable balance between their agricultural practices and the environment.

It has always been highly offensive to most individuals on the land to have a bureaucrat from the city who has never lived on or made a living from the land assume that land-holders' sole purpose in life is to decimate the land they rely on to survive. Most land-holders also recognise that they have to exercise greater flexibility in their operations, but it is necessary that environmentalists also look to their own demands, be a little more flexible and look at things realistically in given situations.

Australia, and Queensland in particular, has an unpredictable water resource, with some areas receiving very little rain while others have regular floods. Water storage and irrigation has become the major water usage method, and in recent years this irrigation has been seen to have a huge impact on our water flows. Water harvesting has been an enormous issue over the last few years, with the Cubbie Station example being the major headline contender. The actions and accusations surrounding Cubbie Station management proved to be in many cases unsubstantiated, and a huge question mark hangs over the science involved in recommendations made to address given situations.

Water harvesting is something that has happened in the past and is still happening in almost every watercourse. There is often a lot of confusion associated with who can and cannot harvest water. The current licensing process has left many in total confusion. That confusion has undermined their confidence even at the local water advisory committee level.

All areas in the Burnett and Brisbane Valley find water their primary concern and always will. Coominya still has no water supply, and constituents rightly ask why that is the case when they are so close to the Wivenhoe Dam. The property owners along the waterways of the Brisbane Valley still struggle to understand the system of licensing—how many licences and what licences people have, how one person can pump continuously while others cannot and how one neighbour retains or increases his water allocation while another neighbour loses his altogether.

The Barlil Weir between Murgon and Wondai, another area that worries about its water, is a small structure, but it will help the people in those areas. But the Paradise Dam will not benefit the area of Kingaroy. The Kingaroy shire has in fact had its water allocation reduced. That water allocation reduction has been seen by the council and general community as an impediment to future growth. Most see the Paradise Dam as a move by government to benefit the Bundaberg area at the expense of others. Everybody recognises the significance of water, but there are a lot of questions about and concerns with this bill. I look forward to the minister's response to not only my question but also the questions asked by others.