



Speech by

JEFF SEENEY

MEMBER FOR CALLIDE

Hansard 30 April 2003

WATER AMENDMENT REGULATION (No. 1) 2003

Mr SEENEY (Callide—NPA) (Deputy Leader of the Opposition) (10.25 p.m.): I move—

That the Water Amendment Regulation (No. 1) 2003 (Subordinate Legislation No. 13 of 2003) tabled in the Parliament on 25 February 2003, be disallowed.

Mr SEENEY: The regulation amends the Water Regulation 2002 as provided for under the Water Act to introduce water charges to water management areas and a water licence fee for each year of the licensed period.

Once again we see a blatant grab for extra money from a government which, as was pointed out in the previous debate, is trying to squeeze as much money as possible from as many areas as possible. Specifically, the minister claims that this is an interim measure which will see all water licences issued under the Water Act 2000 now costing \$50 per annum. Existing charges for water harvesting licence holders who pump directly from rivers will be charged a flat \$3 a megalitre charge.

According to the Natural Resources Minister, Mr Robertson, changes to begin taking effect from April would mark what he calls important progress, putting a true value on the state's precious water resources. That statement should fill all Queensland water users with fear. What it means is this grab for cash from Queensland water users is the first step in what the minister sees as a cash cow that the government can continue to milk. It is obvious that Queensland water users are going to be continually squeezed for money over a period of time. What we see tonight in this regulation which we seek to disallow is just the first step in that process.

These charges were announced at the end of January without any consultation with Queensland water licence holders. In fact, quite the reverse was true. The first that any water users knew of the charges was the media reports of the minister's statement. Rather than any consultation with water users, the minister and the government chose to embark on a well-worn model of demonising Queensland water users as an attempt to justify these charges.

I am sure that most members in this House will remember the scenario as it unfolded. The Premier and the Minister for Natural Resources set out to demonise the irrigators in the Lower Balonne. Specifically, they set out to demonise the owners of one large irrigation project there, Cubbie Station, and somehow build a case that that operation should be shut down.

Mr Springborg: They hand-picked Professor Cullen.

Mr SEENEY: Absolutely. They hand-picked Professor Cullen. In the end, his report gave the lie to the claims that they were making at the time, but that took a while to develop. However, when their charade was exposed by a number of different mechanisms, they hit back with a vengeance and imposed this \$3 a megalitre charge which will affect all water users who harvest water from rivers and streams. It will affect the Cubbie Station operation much more than anybody else in Queensland.

This was a vindictive strike at an operation that the government tried quite dishonestly and cynically to close down for its own base political purposes. That attempt to close that operation down had no basis in scientific fact, and that was exposed by the Cullen report. As the member for Southern Downs and the Leader of the Opposition have said, it was exposed by the government's own hand-picked professor. There was a whole range of dishonesty and deceit exposed in that whole charade that the government embarked upon. It was a cynical grab for cash in terms of the state government trying to access the national competition payments that it thought it would lose. It was a cynical grab for

cash in terms of grabbing the cash that it could see was becoming available under the national action plan for salinity.

It cooked up this falsehood that somehow or other if it could close down the Cubbie Station operation and destroy the Dirranbandi community it could access two sources of money: it could access the money from the national action plan for salinity—quite erroneously, because it has been shown that the salinity issue is not even a factor in that particular situation—and it could access the money it thought it was going to lose from national competition payments. When it failed in that endeavour, when it failed in that deceitful attempt, it came up with this idea of slapping on a \$3 a megalitre charge for water users all over the state, knowing full well that the biggest impact of that charge would be on Cubbie Station.

The government then expanded that out and came up with another idea of a \$50 fee for every bore owner right across the state. It would cost a person \$50 simply to have a licensed bore. Every licensed bore was going to attract a charge of \$50, whether the bore had any water in it or not. That was a great injustice at the time, because at the time we were in the middle of the worst drought for 100 years. Many of my constituents came into my office and said, 'Here we are being charged \$50 for this bore licence for a bore that's got no water in it.' But still the government only saw—

Mr Johnson interjected.

Mr SEENEY: The member for Gregory is dead right. Many of those areas still have not received the relief rain that has been received, fortunately, by constituents in my electorate. But the government was only interested in the cash. It was only interested in the \$50. I believe that the pathetic argument that was put forward to justify this \$50 charge should go down as one of the poorest excuses that has ever been advanced to grab cash from Queensland businesspeople.

The minister somehow tried to justify this \$50 per licence charge as an administration cost. He said that it was an administration cost to recover the cost of administering these licences. It all sounds very rosy to someone who does not know the system, but the people who hold those licences know full well that they get their licence for five years or 10 years and that is all they do. That is all that happens. There is nothing else except a licence that is issued by the department after the driller puts in his bore log of his record of work in constructing the bore and the department issues a licence. That is all the department has to do. It costs the department 50c to send the licence out and probably as much again to issue it, yet the minister was suggesting and continues to suggest that it is somehow going to cost \$50 a year to administer that licensing system. It is an absolute joke to suggest that that is a justifiable charge for the service that the department provides. It is again simply a grab for cash, an attempt by the minister to fill up the holes in his department that have been caused by the dry financial situation that this government finds itself in.

This is a proposal that has been soundly rejected, and so it should have been, by the general community and by the people who are directly affected by it. They were not consulted in any way. There was no warning given in any way and there has been no justification put forward that makes any sense or has any credibility at all. The purpose of moving this disallowance motion in this parliament tonight is to ensure that the minister and the government are held accountable and that they are forced to stand up and explain to those people who will pay that money why they believe this is justified. But going on the previous debates, I suspect that the minister and various irrelevant backbenchers will not do that. They will stand up and talk about everything else, as they did in the previous two debates. They will stand up and talk about everything else except the issue, because they cannot justify the charges. They cannot justify the charges.

Mr Springborg interjected.

Mr SEENEY: Exactly. The minister in a previous debate about aquaculture and fish farming in Moreton Bay did not even mention fish. He talked about tree clearing and all sorts of other issues but did not even address the issue because he could not. He could not justify it. We and the people of Queensland and this parliament will be interested to hear his attempts to justify these charges that are the subject of this motion tonight, because that is the purpose of this disallowance motion. Given the numbers in this place, no-one reasonably expects that the opposition will win the vote at the end of this disallowance motion. But we will be looking for an explanation and a justification for why these charges are being imposed and why they have been imposed in the way that they have, because no such explanation and no such justification has been put forward to date.

The other issue that I believe requires some comment from the minister is the report that was tabled in this parliament by the Scrutiny of Legislation Committee. It is worth noting that the Scrutiny of Legislation Committee is a bipartisan committee consisting of members from all sides of this parliament. The Scrutiny of Legislation Committee was critical of the way that these charges were introduced and the fact that there was not a regulatory impact statement done in relation to the imposition of these charges. And so that committee should have been critical, because there was no consideration of the effects of these charges if one understands the way they were introduced as a knee-jerk reaction to the complete failure of the attempts by the minister and the Premier to bring down the Cubbie Station

operation and to put an end to that farming activity at Dirranbandi. That was a hit-back. It was a vindictive strike back at those people whom they tried to put out of business but failed. So they came up with another idea to hit back at those irrigators whom they had tried to demonise in the public arena and at the same time get their hands on some badly needed cash to prop up a department that has suffered more than most in the financial cutbacks that have become necessary since this government has got deeper and deeper into financial strife.

There is no doubt that water users across Queensland and irrigators in particular have been the subject of a lot of misinformed and quite scurrilous accusations by members of this government and by this minister in particular. Quite scurrilous accusations and quite scurrilous comments have been put forward to justify a number of government positions, and no more so than in the debate that has occurred since these charges were introduced when the minister somehow put forward on one occasion that I remember well the idea that Queensland taxpayers pay for 95 per cent, I think he said, of the water in Queensland, as though some sort of a charge is incurred by Queensland taxpayers for the water that falls and runs down the rivers as a flood that these irrigators flood harvest and use in their business. It is a nonsense suggestion to put forward, but that is the level to which the debate fell when the minister was trying to justify these charges. The irrigators who will feel the imposition of this \$3 a megalitre charge build their own infrastructure. They incur their own costs. They put their own hands in their own pockets and put up infrastructure that makes a business possible where none existed before. They go to their bank and borrow large sums of money to build a business where nothing existed before. Everybody benefits from that. The entire Queensland community benefits from that. If they chose not to do that, the whole Queensland economy would be the poorer. Towns such as Dirranbandi would not exist.

The government does not provide that infrastructure. The government does not incur a cost. There is no cost to be recovered. This is simply a grab for the money of people who have shown the initiative to generate some money for themselves. People who have been prepared to put their hand in their pocket and make a success of something are suddenly whacked with a charge by the government and told, 'We'll have some of that, because we need it. Somehow the state is in financial trouble and this is a chance for us to get a share of that.' These charges and this regulation should be disallowed and this parliament should support this disallowance motion.