Speech by

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WATER AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr SEENEY (Callide—NPA) (Deputy Leader of the Opposition) (4.27 p.m.): I rise to make some comments about the Water and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2003 currently before the House. This bill makes a range of amendments to the Water Act 2000 and makes some specific amendments to the Land Act 1994, the Land Title Act 1994, the Integrated Planning Act 1997 and the Valuation of Land Act 1994. As is outlined in the explanatory notes, the government feels that this bill is necessary because changes have been identified as a result of ongoing implementation of the Water Act and also to facilitate proposed new water infrastructure in the Burnett Basin.

The Water Act has now been in place for two and a half years, and it is understandable that there would be a need to amend some of the provisions of that act. This bill sets out to amend a range of small but important issues that have come to the fore since the implementation of the Water Act in the year 2000. The Water Act was part of the water reform process that the opposition generally supported.

However, it would be appropriate to note at this stage that the part of the Water Act which we did not support still has not been amended. That refers specifically to the water resource planning process and the 10-year rollover of the water resource plans and the fact that water allocations and water entitlements can be eroded away at the end of each one of those 10-year periods with no compensation payable or due to the holders of those water entitlements. It is that insecurity of title and that potential loss of property rights of water entitlement holders that has always been a part of the Water Act that the opposition has not supported, will continue not to support and will continue to argue is unjust and unfair. More than that, we will continue to argue that that part of the Water Act will produce a result that is the opposite of the one that the government argues is its intent in the implementation of the Water Act.

It is therefore necessary for me to put on record that I am disappointed that this bill, which sets out to amend the Water Act, does not address that obvious inequity and unfairness which was part of the Water Act 2000. In that respect the bill before the House today is lacking.

The water reform process set out to separate water entitlements from land titles. There are a number of elements of this bill which finetune that process of separating the water entitlements from land titles. That is a process which has had our support and has been an essential part of the water reform process. It allows those water entitlements to be traded. It is in the overall interests of water use and water users for those entitlements to be traded to areas of higher value and to allow water users to trade between themselves those entitlements to ensure that their own particular enterprises are able to acquire or realise the capital value that has become part and parcel of those water entitlements over the years.

There needs to be a security of title. There needs to be security in the property right that water users hold that entitles them to use water. That property right has certainly been eroded by the water reform process that has been undertaken in the way that I spoke about before, in that those entitlements can be eroded away every 10 years.

It has also been eroded away by the allocation system that has been put in place which allows announced allocations to be almost always considerably less than the nominal allocation. The nominal allocations that the water users have enjoyed and the nominal allocation that has formed part of their

property right has almost, without any fanfare at all or almost without any explanation at all, been eroded away—quite substantially in some cases—by the fact that now announced allocations are almost always considerably less than the nominal allocations. There are a number of issues that relate to water entitlements and water allocations that no doubt will be the subject of debate in the committee stage of this legislation.

The most important part of this debate I believe is to recognise the importance of secure property rights—the importance of the security of the entitlements and the allocations that water users hold—so that this trading system can work properly, so that we can get some long-term sensible decision making about the use of our natural resources, in this case water, so that we can encourage those water users to use those water entitlements and allocations in a sustainable and responsible way.

Unless we have that security of title, not just with water but with all natural resources, then we are not going to see that type of sensible decision making and that move to sustainable management decisions that I think everyone wants to see, that we certainly want to see on this side of the House, and that the government espouses at every opportunity but unfortunately does not achieve because the legislation, such as the Water Act and various other pieces of legislation, refuses to acknowledge the importance of this security of title issue.

This security of property right that property owners need, irrespective of what the property is—in this case we are talking about water entitlement or water allocation—is critically important to achieving any sort of sustainable management, any sort of sensible decision making. Unless a property owner has that security of title, then the obvious incentive is to get as much as they can as quickly as they can from that particular property right. That leads to unfortunate decision makings. The incentives are all in the wrong direction in that particular instance.

While this bill does tinker around the edges with a series of small changes to the water allocation and water entitlement system, it does not begin to address the fundamental issue of the security of those water property rights held as water entitlements or water allocations that were such a failing of the Water Act 2000, and that is particularly disappointing.

It is worth while to note that the scrutiny of legislation has identified that this piece of legislation has an element within it which reverses the onus of proof on property owners in regard to the overuse of water in particular circumstances. This is very much like the reversal of onus of proof that was encompassed within the vegetation management legislation that was debated in this House recently.

Once again we see a situation where landowners are being asked, or property holders are being asked, to prove themselves innocent against an accusation that can be levelled at them by a government department, in this case by the Department of Natural Resources or probably by the government owned corporation Sunwater.

It is bad enough that we have this situation where the reversal of onus of proof is almost becoming a standard part of legislation, especially in regard to natural resources legislation. It is bad enough that we have this element of reversal of onus of proof in the legislation at all. It is even worse given the situation that has become a reality in Queensland, where the trust between landowners, property owners and the Department of Natural Resources and the government has broken down completely. In that situation, where there is no trust, there is no expectation that the department can be relied upon to do the right thing.

This reversal of onus of proof that has been identified by the Scrutiny of legislation committee becomes a much greater issue than it otherwise would. In a situation between two individuals or between an individual and an administering authority where all trust has disappeared, it becomes more critical that there are processes in place to ensure that situations do not arise in which individuals are treated in a manner that none of us would suggest is fair. That, unfortunately, I believe is certainly a possibility in regard to that clause or that element of the legislation. No doubt we will discuss that further in the committee stage of the legislation. It is the same element as has been included in the vegetation management legislation. The same concerns are certainly expressed by the Scrutiny of Legislation Committee this time as they were when that last piece of legislation was introduced into the House.

I just wonder whether or not this is going to become a standard part of all of the Beattie government's legislation where we are going to see a reversal of onus of proof, where people are going to be required to prove themselves innocent rather than have an authority prove that they are guilty, or is this something that is just unique to natural resource management? Is this something that is just unique to the administration of natural resources in this particular minister's department?

I think the people of Queensland need some explanation as to why this is necessary every time it is included within a particular piece of legislation. Is it going to be a standard part of the government's legislation, or is it just that this particular department and this particular minister believe that the people who own and use Queensland's natural resources somehow need to be treated differently and need to be assumed to be guilty and forced to prove themselves innocent?

I can tell the Minister that that is the impression that this series of pieces of legislation is giving to the land holding community in Queensland. That is unfortunate, because it continues to break down that relationship between individuals and the government department that administers the natural resources which are the key part of the businesses that they run. While that relationship continues to be eroded and continues to deteriorate, we are not going to get the sort of progress that is so often espoused by the government.

The bill before the House makes some changes to the Burnett River resource operation plan, particularly in relation to the Barlil Weir. The Barlil Weir is a relatively small structure to be built between Murgon and Wondai, which is actually within my electorate so I know the area particularly well. Even though it is only a small part, it is a very essential part of the infrastructure that is necessary in the Burnett River Basin. Much of the emphasis is given to the Paradise Dam whenever infrastructure within the Burnett River Basin is spoken about in this place and in the public debate. It is critically important that these small structures are also recognised as an essential part of that infrastructure package, because the Burnett River Basin is quite large and very diverse in terms of a large number of tributaries that form the economic base of a large number of communities.

It is essential that those communities in the upstream areas are allowed to use the water resources in those areas to enhance that economic base. It would be unfortunate and we have to continually guard against the tendency for Burnett River infrastructure to be seen as something that is going to be built to service the industries at the mouth of the river in the Bundaberg and Childers area, because there are a large number of communities in that upstream area which could very well use an increase in access to the water resources of the Burnett River Basin. The Barlil Weir is going to be a relatively small structure with an allocation of only 4,250 megalitres, but it will make a difference in that immediate area and provide some extra water to water users who badly require that extra allocation in that area.

It deserves a mention as to how this allocation of 4,250 megalitres has been arrived at. In the debate on the Water Act 2000 and in subsequent debates in this House where that act was previously amended to allow for the construction of the Paradise Dam, this question of what the available allocation is in relation to the environmental flow limits that have been identified in the water resource plan has been thoroughly canvassed. Again here we have another allocation being made available—this time for the Barlil Weir. I certainly support that, but it once again highlights the need for those figures within that water resource plan to be constantly reviewed and the basis upon which they were decided to be constantly reviewed to ensure that extra water can be made available as time goes on and as the administration of those water systems becomes more exact.

There were a number of elements to the calculations that went into drawing up those environmental flow limits that certainly had a degree of inaccuracy, and that was recognised by the people who were doing it. It was very much a new area in terms of the science that was involved. Those environmental flow limits that were arrived at could easily have been quite different numbers. If those environmental flow limits are moved to the full extent of the variability, it means that there is considerably more water available for water users within the Burnett River Basin. Last time we debated a piece of legislation that amended the Water Act to allow for the construction of the Paradise Dam and the Eidsvold Weir I did make the point that those environmental flow limits should not be seen as hard and fast rules. They should not be seen as hard and fast lines across which we must not trespass. I think that point needs to be continually made.

The illustrations that appeared in the water resource planning documents were particularly good in outlining the concept that the planners had in mind where the need for environmental concern changed on a gradual basis as those flow limits or those factors increased. It is certainly not a case where we cannot go across a particular line—that is, on one side of the line it is environmentally acceptable and on the other side of the line it is doom and disaster—yet there are people engaged in the public debate who like to promote that idea that these things are set in stone and cannot be increased. I would hope that, in time, as the science involved in the modelling of the whole Burnett River system is refined, the precautionary principle that has been part and parcel of that planning process can be relaxed a little and more water can be made available to those areas.

Even though this 4,250 megalitres will be particularly welcome in that part of the South Burnett, there is a great need for more water to be made available particularly in that South Burnett area but also within the Central Burnett area. They are just as important as the areas that will benefit from the Paradise Dam, that is, the areas further down the river system that are represented by the member for Burnett and the member for Bundaberg. The upstream users are just as in need of extra water resources as those users further down the system.

There is an issue in the Central Burnett area that I am sure the minister is aware of that would be appropriate to mention in the context of this debate, and that is the issue with the Burnett River flood harvesters and the conversion of their licences from a flood harvesting licence to a volumetric licence. That was part of the whole planning process and I know that the department has been

negotiating with the Burnett River flood harvesters, who are particularly concerned about the water entitlement that they are going to end up with. This bill before the House refers to historic use agreements and clause 52 refers to the conversion of entitlements and volumetric limits. Those concepts are essentially what is at the heart of the dispute that has caused a great deal of angst for the people who were traditionally flood harvesters in that part of the Central Burnett. Once again the argument for them is that they have an equal entitlement to harvest that water as the people who would benefit from it should they not harvest it, and that is the people who will benefit from the construction of the Paradise Dam.

While we have not seen a resolution yet to that particular issue, I would express to the minister the hope that some fairness and equity can apply and that the quite valid arguments that have been put forward by those people about their historic use agreements can be adequately addressed by his department. When we get to those particular clauses that deal with volumetric limits and conversion of entitlements we might pursue those issues in more detail. The bill also deals with changing water entitlements. This is the area in which all the alarm bells ring for water users. Under the water reform process and under the Water Act 2000, their water entitlements can be changed on a rolling 10-year basis.

It is quite possible—although I would hope not probable—that a water entitlement can be eroded away considerably over time. We are talking about a resource the management of which is over a long period of time—that is, 30, 40 or 50 years. In, say, 50 years it is possible that we will have five different water resource plans in place. At the conclusion of each and at the start of the next, water entitlements can be eroded. Over a period of five of those rollovers a water entitlement could be eroded substantially, certainly to a point at which the economic viability of an operation could be threatened. That is the reason the compensation principles I spoke about at the beginning of my contribution are so important.

Mr Robertson interjected.

Mr SEENEY: We will have a chance to talk about the detail in the committee stage. I am sure the minister looks forward to that as much as I do. I hope that his keenness to participate in the second reading debate persists into the committee stage. We will talk about the detail then.

This bill sets out to ensure that the percentage of the total water available in a particular catchment remains the same for each entitlement holder. An example is set out in the explanatory notes of a person with one-thousandth of the water available in a catchment maintaining that same percentage of water as the water entitlements change. That in itself is fair enough, but it does not address the essential element of the security of the property right that people need to invest in to develop businesses that have a 30-, 40- or 50-year life span and that will have to weather four, five or six changes in water resource plans.

I note also in that proposed section of the bill there is what is referred to as a long form and a short form for amending the water resource plan. I support the concept that has been put forward, namely, that there should be two different ways of amending water resource plans. There is provision within the long form to include the type of compensation provision which I believe and which we have always argued should have been part of the Water Act 2000. Essentially, that issue will not go away. It will continue to be an issue and we will continue to argue that those compensation provisions need to be there to provide the security of title that is needed for proper management regimes to be put in place and for sustainable management to be achieved in the long term.

The other issue that I need to talk about in relation to the Burnett River infrastructure is the land resumptions taking place in and around the Paradise Dam site. I have spoken at length previously in this House about the need for land resumptions to be carried out fairly and in such a way that does not put the owners of the land identified as needed for public use through unnecessary angst or disruption. Unfortunately, that has not been the case with the Paradise Dam land resumptions. It is particularly disappointing that this sort of problem continues to arise. I acknowledge that land resumptions are never easy. Every honourable member who has had to deal with land resumptions in their electorate recognises that land resumptions are never easy. People are likely to be upset when asked to give up their piece of land for public infrastructure.

When we as a community identify that an individual's land is required for public infrastructure, I believe we have a duty of care and a responsibility that cannot be underestimated or understated to ensure that that individual is not asked to bear the cost of what will provide a benefit to us all. Whether that land is being resumed for roads, schools or whatever, the government of the day has a responsibility to ensure that those individuals being asked to sell what is theirs are not put through a negative experience. That is exactly what has happened with respect to the Paradise Dam land resumptions.

Burnett Water was the corporate entity set up by the government—I will not go into the reasons why it was set up—to pursue the project. It went into the marketplace and set out to acquire the land

required for the Paradise Dam in some sort of commercial negotiation-type exercise. At all times during that so-called commercial negotiation exercise the threat of compulsory resumption was hanging over the heads of these land-holders. That threat of compulsory resumption was used in a way by the people conducting those commercial negotiations that was quite unacceptable. Ordinarily, somebody in the field trying to acquire land by commercial negotiation would not have had the benefit of having the compulsory acquisition process as a big stick hanging over the negotiations. That has affected the balance of fairness within those commercial negotiations.

As far as I know, most of the land has been acquired through commercial negotiations and there are still some parcels of land that may go through the compulsory acquisition process. We in this parliament have a responsibility, irrespective of the side of the House on which we sit, to get this issue of acquiring private land for public use right. It is unacceptable to see Queenslanders put through the anguish, frustration and trauma that I have seen my constituents go through in the acquisition of land for Paradise Dam. It has been very difficult for me as a local member, as it would be for any local member in that situation, because of the commercial negotiation process. Until that process of negotiation between Burnett Water and the individual land-holders was finalised, the compulsory acquisition processes set out in the compulsory acquisition of land legislation did not kick in. However, that combination did not work well. It did not do anything to facilitate that process. It is something that I believe the government needs to bear in mind.

If the government is going to acquire land for public infrastructure such as this in the future, I suggest the Paradise Dam example is not one that it should follow. It did not produce a desirable outcome or make it any easier for those people involved. In my view, it would have been better had the government gone through the compulsory acquisition process right from the start instead of combining the two processes, that is, not use the commercial transaction process at the same time as having the compulsory acquisition process hanging over people's heads. It was used quite blatantly in particular cases where people were in negotiation with Burnett Water and at the same time compulsory acquisition notices were being published in the local newspaper. For people who did not understand the complexities of the process or the differences between commercial negotiation and a compulsory acquisition process it was a very frustrating and worrying time. I do not think we can overstate the importance of getting that process right.

Clause 137 of the bill makes some amendments to the Fitzroy River water resource plan. The clause contains a series of small amendments to the conversion of water entitlements, the priority of those water entitlements and the rate of take that is allowable for those water entitlements. The whole issue of security of water entitlements is addressed in those amendments to the Fitzroy River water resource plan.

Currently, the Fitzroy River resource operation plan is causing a great deal of concern within that Fitzroy River basin—and quite rightly so. Once again, the impact of these planning processes upon individuals, existing operations and communities has not been properly canvassed by the government. We could be forgiven for thinking that the government is not particularly interested in the impact, because no socioeconomic study has been done in regard to the Fitzroy River draft resource operation plan. That plan was introduced just before Christmas. I believe that its introduction was designed to reduce or minimise the level of scrutiny that was going to be available. Irrigators were given three months to respond to the plan, but the fact that it was introduced just before Christmas meant that it took a while—after the holiday period—before the impacts of the resource operation plan became clear to the people who were going to be affected by it.

There was next to no consultation. The Department of Natural Resources and Mines failed to consult properly with the irrigators and the communities who were going to be directly affected by that resource operation plan. That has had the understandable outcome of a further reduction in the confidence that water users and those communities have in the department. That level of confidence is now at a new low. In fact, confidence in the whole process is at a new low.

There is a proposal to enlarge the release outlet at the bottom of Fairbairn Dam—to release about 4,000 megalitres of water per day for 21 days. That is quite a large amount of water to be released from what has been one of the most successful irrigation dams in Queensland. Too often in this House members stand up and talk about the negative impacts of water use. They like to point to the problems—real or imagined—of particular irrigation schemes in Queensland. They love to talk about the lower end of the Murray and the quite obvious problems and mistakes that have been made there. We very seldom hear the success stories, such as the Fairbairn Dam at Emerald. I suggest that those members opposite who like to participate in these debates get themselves out to Emerald and have a look at the way in which the Fairbairn Dam is operated and the great success that has been achieved there and the great community that has developed in Emerald simply because of the Fairbairn Dam and the water that it has made available not only to irrigated cropping but also to coalmining and a range of other smaller industries.

This proposal to release some 4,000 megalitres of water a day for 21 days will undoubtedly erode the reliability and the viability of that dam. For quite a number of years now that irrigation project has proven to be one of the great success stories. It has contributed to a very viable and very prosperous community. That viability will certainly be eroded and the confidence of that community will be destroyed by this proposal to release such a large percentage of the water from the dam in the way that has been suggested. That proposal will have a major impact on that region of central Queensland, which has prospered markedly more than other regions in Queensland.

Organisations in central Queensland have conducted studies into the impact that this proposal in the draft resource operation plan will have on the region's primary production. I believe that some of the statistics that have been revealed by those studies need to be taken into account in this debate. Over the past 10 years, the dam has been at almost 100 per cent allocation. If implemented, the draft resource operation plan would have seen three of those years with nil allocation. So for three of the past 10 years, there would have been nil allocation and no irrigated cropping in that area of central Queensland. Under this draft resource operation plan, in those three years there would have been no allocation, hundreds of millions of dollars would have been wiped off the central Queensland economy, and hundreds of millions of dollars would have been lost to the Queensland economy with the loss of the cotton and horticultural crops that have been growing in that particular area. That would have also represented thousands of on-farm and industry jobs lost.

That is a part of the water planning process that the Beattie government seems reluctant to get into. There has been no socioeconomic impact study done of the proposals that are contained in the draft resource operation plan. The Beattie government has tried to rush through this draft plan without any consultation with primary producers and next to none with the local community. Is it any wonder that confidence in the planning process and confidence in the department is so low in that area?

There is a very strong need to protect the environment and to ensure sufficient environmental flows. That can be taken as a given. But no-one can ignore the fact that thousands of people in central Queensland rely on irrigation for their production. If the proposals that are contained within the draft resource operation plan come to fruition, those crops and the livelihoods that are dependent on them are certainly at risk.

I acknowledge that the minister has extended the submission deadline to the middle of the year. That needed to be done. But I hope that the minister will do more than that and take notice of the concern that the irrigators and the communities have expressed about the draft resource operation plan. I hope that we will not see a situation that will jeopardise the viability of the most successful irrigation scheme in central Queensland, because this draft plan, if implemented in its entirety, has the potential to cut hundreds of millions of dollars out of that local economy and cut thousands of on-farm jobs and local town jobs.

I would like to address the clauses in this bill that deal with the imposition of moratorium notices. The bill allows for moratorium notices to be applied to particular areas where no planning processes are in place. At the moment, the moratorium notices are part of that planning process. This bill allows the minister to apply those moratorium notices to areas where water resource plans have not commenced.

My concern about this element of the bill is that it seems to me that it will allow moratorium notices to be imposed indefinitely. Although I acknowledge that the bill contains a requirement for the minister to review those moratoriums each year, while they are not part of a planning process there is no incentive to arrive at a stage at which those moratorium notices can be lifted. I imagine that the only way in which a moratorium notice would be lifted would be if that planning process was completed. Once the planning process is completed and the resource available in that particular catchment was identified, then the moratorium notice could be lifted and the development that was the subject of that moratorium would be allowed to proceed. However, under the provisions of this bill, the moratorium notice would be put in place but the planning process would not commence. There would be no incentive—there would be no likelihood even—that a moratorium would be lifted at any foreseeable time in the future simply because nothing changes until the planning process is completed.

At least when the planning process is in place it becomes something that is measurable in terms of an outcome of the department. It becomes something that we look at each year—how many of these water resource plans the department has concluded for a particular year and how many river operation plans are part of the outcome that the department identifies in its budgetary processes each year. That results in an incentive for the department to complete those planning processes in particular catchments.

It would be unlikely that once the planning process was started in a particular catchment it would not be completed within a three-year or five-year time frame. If the planning process was still going on in a particular catchment 10 years after it was started, I as the shadow minister and other people would be asking questions about that. That in itself would provide an incentive for that planning process to be completed, so that the moratorium that was imposed as part of it could be lifted and the development identified as possible within that catchment could proceed.

If we go away from that process—if we take the ability to impose a moratorium out of that process and allow the minister to impose moratoriums without that planning process—there is no incentive at all for those moratoriums to be lifted. I think what is being proposed is a recipe for moratoriums that will be applied indefinitely. I suggest to the minister that the parliament deserves an explanation of his intent in relation to those moratoriums. No doubt during the committee stage we will have a chance to explore that intent and look at how those moratoriums will be used.

The bill also deals with the requirement for land and water management plans. The land and water management planning process is something I personally support very strongly. It is something I believe is very much needed by the industry as a tool to defend itself against some of the hysterical and emotive claims that are increasingly made about the activities of the irrigation industry in particular. Some of those claims are quite ludicrous and can be shown to be so. But the industry needs a tool to be able to show the silliness and unfairness of some of those claims.

Land and water management plans, if they are properly constructed, properly used and part of a proper overall management process, can be used to rebut some of the emotive and sensationalist claims that are made by the anti-everything brigade that seems to have the intent of closing down the irrigation industry right across Queensland.

I certainly support the land and water management planning process, even though I do recognise that it is an imposition on land-holders. Land-holders are understandably cautious about the increasing number of such impositions that are being placed on their businesses. But I believe it is critical for the industry to embrace this land and water management planning process to give itself the tool to rebut the sensational and emotive claims that are all too often made.

This bill extends the requirements for those land and water management plans in a number of areas. One of those is in relation to seasonal transfer users of water. The extension of those land and water management plans is something we would certainly support. I take this opportunity to encourage water users to embrace that land and water management planning process.

The bill also contains an element which seeks to delay valuation changes when water entitlements are separated from the land. I am a little puzzled as to why this particular provision is in the legislation. The whole issue of unimproved value of land is always contentious. I and other members have spoken about that many times in this House. The whole system of arriving at an unimproved valuation for a particular piece of land is becoming increasingly difficult. The particular section of this bill that deals with changes in that valuation when the water entitlement is separated is something we will have to discuss to some degree in the committee stage. The bill sets out to delay those valuation changes for 12 months. I think the minister has an inherent responsibility to explain to the parliament why that particular element has been included in this bill.

Clauses 144 and 146 of the bill address an issue of utmost importance to water users throughout my electorate and right throughout Queensland. Clause 144 deals with the minister's power of direction over government owned corporations. Of course, the government owned corporation in this particular instance is SunWater. Clause 146 goes on to clarify the situation of water entitlements and their transfer to SunWater.

I have said before in this parliament—I will say it again and I will continue to say it at every opportunity I get—that the government and the minister in particular cannot use SunWater to abrogate their responsibilities to the water users of Queensland. The fact that this particular element is included in clause 144 of this bill evidences the argument that I and other members have made in this House over a long period of time.

The government owned corporation system—the government sets up these GOCs and asks them to operate in a corporate manner, at arms-length from the cabinet decision making process—probably has particular advantages, but I think it has been grossly misused by this government, particularly in relation to decisions that it knows are unpopular or difficult. That is exactly the position that the minister has adopted in relation to SunWater.

That position has also been adopted by other ministers. Those of us who were in the House this morning during question time saw a classic example of it with the Minister for Tourism and Racing. The minister refuses to take any responsibility for decisions that impact severely on Queenslanders throughout the whole state. That is the case with decisions that have been taken by SunWater, yet the minister refuses to take any responsibility.

This government's ministers use this GOC argument as a cop-out. The nonsense and the absurdity of that argument is demonstrated clearly by clause 144 of this bill, which deals with the minister's power of direction over those government owned corporations. Of course the minister has power of direction over those government owned corporations, and that should be the case. The government of this state is elected by the people of this state to administer these particular areas of public administration. This morning the example was Queensland Racing. In this particular instance the example is the administration of the water resources within the state.

Whether it is the administration of Queensland racing or the administration of water resources, government owned corporations such as SunWater and Queensland Racing cannot be used as a cop-out by ministers who refuse to do the job for which they are paid. That is what is happening with SunWater at the moment. It has been happening with SunWater for quite some time. If there is one organisation that has been at the heart of the reason the trust and confidence of Queensland water users in the government has been destroyed, it is SunWater and the attitude it has adopted towards people who are essentially its customers—towards people who have always had an entitlement or a water allocation and have previously dealt with the Department of Natural Resources or the Water Resources Commission and who are now being asked to deal with this government owned corporation called SunWater.

The approach that SunWater has taken has been abysmal in terms of customer relations and any sort of corporate responsibility. It has destroyed any sort of confidence that water users have had or may have had in that water reform process. That is not only disappointing but also tragic in terms of achieving the outcomes that we want to see and that responsible people in regional Queensland want to see and which the government stands up in this House and espouses as its aim.

While we have this sort of approach from government owned corporations like SunWater, those outcomes will not be achieved. They will not be achieved until the minister takes some responsibility for the actions of SunWater and uses those powers that are referred to in clause 144 of this bill to give some direction to government owned corporations—in this case SunWater—to act in a manner that, one, would be much more acceptable from a corporate point of view and, two, would be much more in keeping with what should be expected from a government in its relationship with the people who elect it.

Clause 144 deals with the power of direction that shareholding ministers have over SunWater. I certainly support the fact that ministers should have the power of direction. The point should be made here at every opportunity that they should have the power of direction. Of course they would anyway, because with every one of these government owned corporations there are two shareholding ministers. Even in the corporate world, using as an example a corporation with two shareholders, those shareholders would have a fair bit of influence on the activities of that particular corporation. Even in the corporate world, quite removed from government, if a shareholder of a corporation with only two shareholders were to ring the CEO of a corporation and say, 'I do not think this is a good idea' or 'I do not think this outcome is to anyone's benefit', then it would be appropriate to think that the CEO of that corporation would take a bit of notice and be influenced by the opinion of those shareholders. That is even more so when we are talking about government owned corporations.

It is absurd and ludicrous to suggest that ministers have no influence over the activities of government owned corporations of which they are sole shareholders. This whole tendency to use government owned corporations as some sort of a buffer from public opinion or a buffer from constituents is one that has to be brought to an end. The government needs to be accountable for the actions that it takes and the policies that it implements. That is the reality of any government that sits on that side of this House. Whoever sits on the government benches needs to be accountable to the people who are affected by the decisions that the government makes.

The idea of continually using GOCs to shirk that responsibility and to hide from that accountability that should be part and parcel of occupying that side of the House is something that I believe is despicable and has to be brought to an end. Ministers have to be held to account for the activities of GOCs for which they are accountable and responsible. As much as we are able, the opposition will continue to use whatever mechanisms are available to us in this House to ensure that ministers are responsible for the activities of the government owned corporations that operate under their jurisdiction. In this case, we are talking about SunWater, and we could not get a better example.

There are a number of issues that will be addressed in the committee stage of the debate. I look forward to hearing from the minister some of those—

Mr Shine interjected.

Mr SEENEY: The member for Toowoomba North can go home if he likes. With the contribution that he makes to this place, he probably would not be missed. He can go home if he likes, but we intend to explore the provisions of this legislation on behalf of the people who will be affected by it. I look forward to the minister responding to some of those issues that I have raised. We will continue to pursue these issues in the committee stages of the debate.