



Speech by

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IRVINEBANK STATE TREATMENT WORKS REPEAL BILL

Dr LESLEY CLARK (Barron River—ALP) (4.34 p.m.): I rise to speak in support of the Irvinebank State Treatment Works Repeal Bill. This bill sets out to resolve an issue that has been an ongoing problem for the Irvinebank community for nearly two decades. It came to a head last year, but particularly earlier this year, when the proprietor of the Loudoun House Museum in Irvinebank, and also concerned members of the Irvinebank community and many tourists who had visited the museum, contacted me to seek my assistance in resolving a situation that had seen the many tourists visiting the town's most popular attraction denied safe and reliable access to this wonderful attraction. This has become the catalyst for us to review the whole situation as it relates to the treatment works in Irvinebank.

I will share with members of the House some of the history of Irvinebank because it is very important and very relevant for this particular piece of legislation. As I have said, it is a very historic place located west of Cairns and nestled in the highlands of the Atherton Tablelands beyond Herberton. Irvinebank, as a tin mining town, was founded in 1882 by Gibbs, McDonald, Eales and party with the establishment of the Great Northern Tin Mine and other tin bearing mines. Originally known as Gibbs Camp, the town's name was changed to Irvinebank by one of Queensland's most well-known mining entrepreneurs John Moffat because it reminded him of his birthplace on banks of the River Irvine in Scotland.

Some colourful characters have worked in the mines of Irvinebank including Ted 'Red' Theodore and Bill McCormack. Both men went on to become Queensland Premiers. Theodore also obtained the position of federal Treasurer and Deputy Prime Minister.

Loudoun House, established in 1884, was originally the home of John Moffat and was named by him out of respect and administration for the Loudoun family, who also hailed from the Irvine Valley. Moffat then proceeded to set up a tin treatment works called the Loudoun Tin Mill and the timber weir on McDonald's Creek that became known as Loudoun Dam. In 1906 the Ibis Dam was constructed and continues to supply water to the town of Irvinebank.

After learning that tin lodes were not as profitable as first hoped, and in an effort to salvage his investment, Moffat came up with the idea of establishing a central treatment works and set about acquiring surrounding tin leases to put his plan into place. He also commissioned a tin smelter and in 1907 opened the Stannery Hills-Irvinebank tramway.

The Irvinebank treatment facility became the property of the state in 1919. Under state ownership the mill treated parcels of tin ore brought in by miners in the district, commonly treating 6,000 to 7,000 tonnes of ore a year. However, by 1981 the mill had run to a loss for several years and the government of the day, the Bjelke-Petersen regime, decided to sell off the works and a purchaser was identified, Mr Frank Hilla.

Among the assets the purchaser was contracted to acquire were plant, equipment, buildings, the Loudoun recycled water dam, tailings, the Ibis water storage, the supply dam and the pipeline between the Ibis Dam and the treatment works. It was also required to maintain the works in good order, to preserve and progressively restore the historically significant buildings and to provide and maintain the bulk water supply to the town of Irvinebank.

As I said, sadly for some time now, visitors to the museum, popular with many self-drive tourists discovering the north's rich cultural heritage, have had to negotiate a steep, narrow and difficult path to access the museum because the usual access through a portion of land known as the Irvinebank State Treatment Works has been blocked by Mr Hilla. For reasons that are unclear, the purchaser of the treatment works had decided, against the wishes of the broader Irvinebank community, to deny access to the Loudoun House Museum through the former access that had been historically established through the neighbouring treatment works site.

This decision effectively meant that a large number of visitors to the museum, many of whom were elderly and with limited mobility, were unable to access the museum via the less than ideal alternative access. It also meant that supplies needed to operate the museum effectively had to be hauled by hand along a steep, long trail—an onerous process that was rapidly losing its appeal with the museum director, Mr Tony Derksen. With the Loudoun House Museum being one of the most popular attractions in the town, it is little wonder that the community of some 85 locals was distressed and angered by the way the situation had evolved.

I became personally involved in this issue when I was approached by the committee involved with the museum to visit Irvinebank, look at the situation for myself and see the problems that had been created by the lack of access. While I was there I made it my business to spend a considerable length of time with Mr Hilla, his wife and family and also with Mr Peter Shimmin, the caretaker of the museum. It was there that I learned about the long history of this whole situation, which goes back, as has been said, many years. It became very clear to me that there has developed what we could regard as a feud between the Hilla family and the rest of the Irvinebank community. It is a very complex situation.

As always with feuds, there are two sides to the situation. There are claims and counterclaims about what has happened in that community. Although I was not in a position to judge personally who was right and who was wrong, I could certainly see that there was a situation that needed to be resolved. The issue that I felt at this point needed to be resolved was the future of that very important cultural heritage site for Irvinebank which, as has been said, does have the potential for a very important tourist attraction as part of a whole trail around those mining communities in far-north Queensland based on Chillagoe, or what is called the Hub, which was part of the Heritage Trails Network project.

I encouraged the minister to become more personally involved with this issue with a view to trying to resolve this matter. Upon gaining knowledge of it—and I know of the further investigations that the minister undertook for himself—it became clear to us that the only way to resolve this was through the piece of legislation we are debating in the House this afternoon.

Importantly—and this has been put on the record, but I would like to repeat it—Mr Hilla did comply with some terms of the sale of the treatment works, not all of them, as has been said. But he did operate and maintain the works for some time. He provided a custom milling service to small miners in increasingly difficult times as the industry dwindled. He engaged in the progressive restoration of some of the buildings, such as the tramway terminus. He maintained the bulk supply of non-potable water to the town. His contribution needs to be recognised. I met with him in his home, which was the old National Bank building. It is appropriate that he should continue to have access to that if he wishes to remain in Irvinebank. However, he was not able to make a viable business out of this enterprise in treating tin. He tried, but he could not make a successful tourist venture out of the treatment works, either. It seemed to me that there were no prospects of it ever being financially viable or of it ever being something he could make work.

On the other hand, next to his land where the treatment works were located was John Moffat's original house with a museum, which was very much a going concern as a tourist attraction in far-north Queensland. It seemed to me that what was needed was to put Loudoun House together with the treatment works to create one cultural heritage precinct that would then be able to attract resources from both state and federal governments to restore it such that it could be a wonderful attraction. The mining history in far-north Queensland is fascinating, is not readily understood and really needs to be told. Irvinebank and John Moffat are central to that history.

I realise it is very difficult for the Hilla family. It has been very difficult for that family and many members of the community for a long period. I wish there were a different way to resolve this, but clearly there is not. There is no way now to mediate a successful resolution to this issue. We have to move down this track. In doing that, I am confident that the individuals who have been working for many years with the museum will in the future be able to work with the Mareeba Shire Council to develop this as a whole cultural heritage site.

I acknowledge the work of Tony Derksen from the Loudoun House Museum and the members from the School of Arts and Progress Association, such as, the local publican, Des Purcell, Dan Dubbeld, the secretary and many others in that community who have worked really hard to try to preserve what is a vital part of the cultural heritage of far-north Queensland. I congratulate the minister on biting the bullet. This has not been easy. The issues that the Hilla family have raised and which the member for Gladstone have brought to the attention of the House need to be answered. I know they can be answered. It is important that we all understand the total picture involved with Irvinebank.

I hope for the sake of this small community that they can move on and in the years ahead have a more peaceful community with people in harmony with one another and can be proud of the wonderful cultural heritage of which they are the custodians. I commend the bill to the House.