



Speech by

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FLUORIDATION OF PUBLIC WATER SUPPLIES AMENDMENT BILL

Mr LANGBROEK (Surfers Paradise—Lib) (10.04 pm), in reply: I want to thank my fellow members of the Liberal Party for their contributions to debate on this bill. As a first-term member, it really is a great honour to have been given the privilege of presenting a bill. I would especially like to thank my colleague the honourable member for Moggill, who is the health spokesman for the Liberal Party. But given that I am the only dentist in the House, when we decided to introduce this fluoridation bill he very kindly let me have the opportunity to present it. I want to place on the record my great appreciation to him and the fellow members of my team and, of course, our leader, the member for Robina, for the great way in which we have worked together on this bill and on other matters in this parliament. I want to note that because it is something that I greatly appreciate and it has certainly made the transition from professional life to parliamentary life a far easier one that I have really enjoyed. So I thank them for their educated and erudite responses to this bill. I would like to respond to each of the members who had input to the debate.

Before I begin, I want to say that I realise that fluoridation is a very emotive issue. That is one of the things that has really come across since I introduced this bill in September last year. But this is one issue where I encourage members to have the courage of their convictions, because we really believe that it is a matter that is important for the health of the young people of Queensland. Fluoridation is something that benefits all people. Unfortunately, I think that, owing to party discipline, we have seen contrived excuses from the members opposite. We heard specious arguments, some of which were based on personal abuse, the use of internet humbug and urban myths and a do-nothing plan from the government that used the excuse of, as I say, personal criticism and abuse and even certain excuses that I just cannot believe such as 'this is the Trojan Horse of the Liberal Party in an attempt to win seats we otherwise would not win'. Unfortunately, I think the electorate will see through the motives of these members. If there is anything we can learn from the Prime Minister, it is to not always do something that is personally popular but to do what you believe is right and the electorate will go with you or be prepared to give you some leeway. In this case, we are going to see a government with a near record majority unable to back its convictions with its vote.

Can I say, though, that I would never have believed that I could be here in my first year presenting a bill, although I mentioned fluoridation in my maiden speech and pledged bipartisan support for fluoridation to the minister and that I would strive to deliver it if he wanted to bring it forward. We have brought it forward. We have the support for it. We support it and the minister said he supported it, but now he is letting us down.

As the member for Moggill mentioned, I was also at the health strategy launch in 2004 when the minister said with regard to children's health that we have identified that the greatest disease that we can do something about for children is dental decay. I stood there and thought, 'Hallelujah! Here we have what the dental profession has been saying for years—dental decay is a disease, a disease you can actually do something about.' We can do something about it. We cannot eliminate the bacteria that causes it—we can control it—but we can make teeth stronger because that is what dental decay is all about.

There are three factors that cause decay or contribute to decay: diet, oral hygiene and inherited susceptibility. Tonight and over the past couple of weeks we have all heard from a lot of members that tooth decay is partially about diet and partially about oral hygiene, but the part we can do something about

is inherited susceptibility. Fluoride makes teeth stronger. It makes them more resistant to decay, but it is not immunisation. It is protection. No-one can immunise absolutely perfectly against decay. If people are going to ignore the other factors of the equation—the diet and the oral hygiene—yes, they will still get cavities. But for people who cannot help themselves—the young people, the kids from lower socioeconomic areas, the people who are constantly being treated throughout other areas of the state where they do not get the education and the advice about diet and oral hygiene—they can be helped with fluoride because it makes teeth stronger. That is what this bill is all about.

I acknowledge the government's investment of \$130 million and I commend that investment, but it is having to be spent because the raw material that we are starting with—the teeth themselves—are not getting the maximum protection. So I am disappointed with the minister's response. He is squibbing it. He is saying that it is the mechanism this bill has put forward that the government has a problem with and he is talking about the cost being passed on to councils. I am also disappointed with the minister's response because he is putting the responsibility back on the councils—talking about educating and consultation. We have had 30 years of educating and consultation. The minister has had the mandate from the Labor Party, from his conference last year, from his director-general, Steve Buckland, Queensland Health and a good number of his backbenchers and ministers. This is a government that constantly says it is doing things for the good of our children who are our future. I just cannot believe that I was at that launch last year when the minister said that, in fluoridation, we are going to do something for children's health. As I have said, he has now squibbed the issue.

I will long remember 24 February 2005 as one of the weirdest days of my life. That was the night that we started debating this bill. I say 'weirdest' because on the night of the 23rd I went to bed staring down the barrel of the worst result for a bill in decades, if not ever, with just my four Liberal colleagues and me supporting the bill that I introduced, the Fluoridation of Public Water Supplies Amendment Bill. I did not look forward to the judgment day when my Liberal colleagues and I would be sitting here on our own for minutes that would seem like hours as a government lacking intestinal fortitude would no doubt remain on that side of the House and hold its political piggy bank close to its chest for fear that opening that piggy bank for the good of the children of Queensland would tarnish whatever image it was trying to put forward as a government.

Was I surprised? Not really. This is just another example of a fair-weather government unable to make tough decisions. But the Leader of the House suspended business at 10 pm, so we were unable to complete the bill. So then as I woke up on Thursday morning I was greeted by the most wonderful sight on page 3 of the *Australian*. An article entitled 'Beattie to demand fluoride in water' stated that the Premier was poised to 'force local councils to add fluoride to urban and regional water supplies'. This was very interesting indeed. On a Wednesday night almost two months ago I sat in this seat and listened as member after member criticised the Liberal Party for forcing local governments to implement fluoridation of the water supply. Where are those members now? They have been led out here by their own leader to make statements contrary to the party's eventual position while he had the knowledge that cabinet would do exactly the opposite to that which they were saying. I seek leave to table this article for the benefit of those members who spoke against the bill for the simple purpose that maybe they can go into the party room and ask why they were led into this House to place their names on the public record as being against something their leader and minister had every intention of bringing in.

Leave granted.

Mr LANGBROEK: The article goes on to state—

Queensland Health wants cabinet to either transfer the possibility for water fluoridation to the state or streamline procedures and provide financial incentives for councils to do the job.

This is a revelation. Many members opposite stood up in this place and espoused the view that for the Liberal Party to force local councils to do anything was, in the words of the member for Redlands, reflective of the behaviour of the National Party government back in the deep, dark days of Joh Bjelke-Petersen, yet the next day we see the same government, of which the member for Redlands is a part, planning to do the thing that he criticised the night before. I fail to see the difference between saying that local councils have to do something with state government support, which is actually the second option outlined in the leaked memo, and saying that the state government is going to take away the power of local government in order to achieve a certain outcome.

There were two strings to this bow being pulled by the Queensland Labor Party. The first was that it was simply wrong to intervene and force local councils to put fluoride in the water. This is a misleading representation of what the Labor Party actually thinks. The Labor Party knows that there are times when the state government must intervene in the matters of local councils for the sake of uniformity for a greater good in the state. The number of members who stood up here and said, 'Yes, this is a good thing, but we cannot force anything, no matter what its value, on local councils,' was ridiculous. Those members have to be kidding themselves considering their own government has been forcing things on local councils, sometimes with good reason, since they were elected. How can government members stand up here and submit that imposing something on local councils is evil when the department of local government and planning web site states in a discussion on the effects of the Integrated Planning Act—

Under the Integrated Planning Act—

remember, this is an act of this parliament brought in by the coalition government with the support of the Labor opposition—

all local councils are required to prepare and implement a planning scheme.

I need not go on any further. Let us focus on those words again for a second: 'the IPA requires local councils'. So here we have the Labor Party on 23 February saying that it will not support a bill for the greater good of this state and the greater health of Queenslanders simply because said bill requires local councillors to do something. Yet on one of the government department web sites we have information on an act that was brought in with the Labor Party's help that imposes a requirement on local governments. The Labor Party may say that planning is not a health issue, that planning and health have nothing to do with one another and that such an analogy is useless.

For the sake of members opposite, let us reflect on a bill that was debated just last year. One of the sticking points surrounding the debate on restricting smoking in pubs and clubs was who would enforce it. The answer was local government authorities—another example of the Labor Party forcing local governments to do something. It may be argued that the smoking regulation was different because the effects of smoking are more horrific and more well known than the effects of tooth decay. I can tell the House two things on that point. If we were the only state with lax smoking laws and as a result we had twice the rate of lung cancer, the government would have people outside this House chanting for heads to roll. Instead, we have another disease—tooth decay, which incidentally has scientifically proven links to cardiovascular problems—with up to twice the rate of, and certainly not less than, any other state. Yet the government refuses to do the one thing that could prevent it. Just because fluoridating the water and helping children's teeth is not a politically sexy thing to do, the government does not want a bar of it.

That leads me to the next issue. Aside from the comments I discussed earlier, the member for Redlands also said that he does not want to override community sentiment. The community does not hate the idea of water fluoridation, and the thought that it does is fuelled by the ramblings of naysayers. The result of a recent poll in the *Gold Coast Bulletin* was 60-40 in favour of fluoridation. These are the types of polls, much like by-elections, that tend to attract more naysayers than those in favour of the cause. If we do not base it just on those figures, this excuse that the community does not want fluoridation is an ill-considered cop-out. Some members talked about the flood of emails coming onto their desks about the poisonous effects of fluoride. To those members I say: did one of those emails come from the Australian Medical Association? Did one of those emails come from the Australian Dental Association or its American counterpart or its British counterpart? No. They would have come from members of the community who have been infected by the conspiracy theories and piffle of people who are either insanely misguided on the science of the issue or have some sick desire to see children suffer at the hands of the dentist's drill. Deep down I know that every member saying, 'I am doing this because of the science,' is not doing it for that reason at all. They are doing it because they are worried that there is this huge tract of people out there who will vote against them for voting for this bill. I cannot bring myself to believe that members would be fooled by such conspiracy theories.

There were other members who said in the debate that the rates of decay would not have been so high if the federal government did not get rid of the Commonwealth Dental Health Program. This is possibly the worst attempt at buck-passing that I have seen yet. The Commonwealth Dental Health Program was a program brought in by the Keating government in the last days of the 1993 election campaign and was there for four years. The target was for 1.5 million patients and the program achieved that. In 1997 when the author of the policy, Paul Keating, intended for it to be discontinued it was discontinued. If any member of the government is willing to stand up here and say that the Beattie government has not discontinued a program of the coalition government that had run its course, I will take back my points on the Commonwealth Dental Health Program. Even the Queensland Labor Party, for all its faults, would realise that one cannot continue every program set out by the government before, as doing so would raise the costs of governing the state exponentially. The Labor Party can do that without keeping on programs that have run their course. However, as I have said, if any member wants to say that the Queensland Labor government did not discontinue a program of the previous coalition government, I would be happy to hear it.

Moreover, the health minister wears with pride the fact that Queenslanders were the only ones to keep in place the funding that would otherwise have been allocated by the federal government. What the member for Sandgate is saying is that Queensland puts the most money into oral health because we continued a program worth \$20 million per year that the other states did not continue yet we still have the worst teeth in Australia. Translated, he is saying that he is prepared to pay top dollar for Queensland children to have the worst teeth in Australia while a cost-effective form of prevention worth millions of dollars in oral health savings goes begging. What did I say about the Labor Party wasting money?

I would like to acknowledge the contributions of certain members. I thank the member for Gympie for her contribution to the debate. She actually stole the advice that I gave her. I gave her a free consultation in respect of saying, 'Yes, while you had eight fillings you may well have had 16 fillings had you not had

fluoride.' I thank her for her contribution to the debate. I note that the member for Barron River was concerned about moving away from the government position. Well, that means the status quo and it means that our children and our adults will suffer from decay rates and gum disease far more than they should. I note the member's concerns about safety and efficacy.

Dentists do not have a vested interest in using fluoride. No-one pays us to use it. No-one gives it to us for nothing. If it was used, as we heard from other members, it would give dentists less work to do. We do not enjoy drilling teeth and inflicting pain on people. We will always be quite happy to say to our patients, 'We'd love to see you just for a check-up and clean once a year and never have to drill a tooth again.' But if someone showed me a community with fluoride where the disease rate is higher than another community without fluoride, it would have to be removed and never be used again. That is the argument about the rest of Australia to all of those people who say it is a bad thing. In that case, the rest of Australia needs to be told and it should be removed. But there are no disease rates that are higher in any of those states that can be attributed to fluoride, because if it were the case it would have to be removed.

The member for Tablelands mentioned poor dental health services. I know; these are the men and women of Queensland, many of whom were my friends at the coalface. It is said that we have bad teeth because of our poor dental health services. We spend more than any other state, yet our teeth are the worst. How can our dental health services be worse than anywhere else when we spend more money on them? It is not just about that. I can tell members that the fluoride tablets that the member for Tablelands and other members mentioned are no longer available. There is a worldwide shortage. I am not sure if this is to do with Pan Pharmaceuticals, but even if people want to give their children protection they can no longer do that because fluoride tablets are no longer available. I mention that for the member for Gladstone, who also mentioned the same issue. We have seen that the Gold Coast councils have withdrawn fluoride tablets. Even if one wants to help their kids, they cannot. In fact, because of public liability issues, we even had the case on the Gold Coast where members of the council said, 'Let's not say that we can even provide tablets, because if we can't provide them then people will possibly hold us liable for the fact that we said we would provide them and can't. So even when the shortage is over, we are not going to provide them anyway.' So, in fact, we are now going backwards, and that is another major concern.

I thank the member for Bundaberg for her reasoned and reasonable response. I agree that the issue is also about diet, but, as I have mentioned, it is a three-pronged armamentarium. I thank the honourable member for Bundaberg for her response which I enjoyed listening to and really appreciated. As I say, she brought up the fact that smoking is a health issue, and that has been mentioned. The member for Gladstone advocated that communities can come out and hopefully lobby their members. I have already said, and I know that other members would agree with this, that this is not an issue that the pro people—the people who are for it—come out on. There will not be any communities that fluoridate water in this day and age, and I say that to the member for Thuringowa who mentioned that issue in relation to Townsville. Try to have a referendum on it now in Townsville and see how that goes. It is very difficult to achieve those sorts of things in this day and age.

The vaccination argument was about serious diseases; we agree. As I have mentioned, there is a correlation between dental disease and heart problems. I congratulate the member for Thuringowa for the fact that he has no cavities. Can I suggest that it is partly because of where he grew up in that there was fluoride in the water. I also say to the member for Thuringowa, the member for Yeerongpilly and the member for Stafford to recommend that Brisbane have a referendum and for Campbell Newman to consider it. As I said, try to have a referendum and see how that goes.

A government member interjected.

Mr LANGBROEK: Or the member encouraged Campbell Newman to try to bring it in in Brisbane.

The member for Nanango was right when she said that people do have the right to choose. They have had the right to choose for the last 30 years and they have been choosing not to have fluoride to the detriment of their children, as I said previously. No-one would deliberately inflict these things on their children, yet through the ignorance of not having fluoride in the water and not giving it to their children because of compliance problems their children have suffered.

Finally, I want to address the comments of one of the members who spoke to the bill. Usually I would have a policy of mentioning speeches during my reply of members who made a positive contribution. However, I was so disappointed with the ad hominem attack from the member for Bundamba that I seek to repeat her comments so that those members who may not have heard them may be similarly disappointed. I have dealt with arguments put forward regarding the forcing of local councils to do certain things. On that point, perhaps the member should spend more time reading her own party's policy than bagging other parliamentarians with debate that does not really contribute to the bill. If she did that, she would realise that her own government forces local councils to do things all of the time.

However, I digress. I say to the member that, yes, I am a rookie in this place. I do not apologise for being a rookie. I do not apologise for being enthusiastic. I do not apologise for not having the resources to

consult with all of those members of the councils, but I think there is a lot of goodwill out there towards fluoridation. As I have said, this is the first time that I have brought a bill into this parliament. However, after trawling through the parliamentary records, I find that this is still one more bill than those presented to the House by the member for Bundamba. I say to her: if the day should come that she ever becomes a minister of the Crown in Queensland or if indeed she works up the courage to move a private member's bill, I would be more than happy to give tips—the rookie giving tips and assistance to the apparent master on what it is like to present a bill to this place. I look forward to the knock on my door.

In conclusion, I thank all members for their contributions to this debate. I urge one more time the importance of this move for Queensland's children. Whether it is tonight or in the Premier's plans to bring in fluoride, I urge members not to be afraid of backflipping; just do it for the sake of the kids in their electorates. I commend the bill to the House.