



Speech by

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WATER AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr LANGBROEK (Surfers Paradise—Lib) (8.34 pm): I am very pleased to rise to speak on the Water and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2005. In doing so, I want to acknowledge the importance of this bill and the significance of any decision relating to water in Australia. Australia, as has been said before, is the driest continent on earth. Water is our most precious natural resource and ensuring that future generations can enjoy this resource should be of primary concern to policy makers.

Last night while watching the news I found it interesting to note that there are calls for more efficient ways of using water and even calls from scientists and other significant experts to raise the cost of water by as much as 200 per cent so that consumers will think before they fritter away this most precious resource. Although I think that any move of that nature will be met with some degree of apprehension, down the track there is certainly a case for raising the cost of water to achieve that end. It seems an awkward juxtaposition for the driest country on earth to be offering the cheapest rates for water.

Another significant cry from this expo on water was smarter ways of capturing and using stormwater and perhaps even looking at using the run-off of stormwater from buildings in the city to supply some of the non-drinking water needs of the buildings and also the much talked about use of grey water for certain purposes. All of these things must be considered in the near future as a way of keeping the supply of water to a standard that is acceptable for the growing population in the region.

Provisions in the Water Act refer to the sustainable allocation of water. It is crucial that from time to time these provisions are updated so that a supply of water can be ensured and that the areas most in need of water receive exactly what they need. I am pleased to see that the amendments in this bill do not really change that vision and that, if the bill is passed in this form, the intention of the act will still be to attempt to ensure the sustainable management of Queensland's precious water supply.

The main objective of this bill is to streamline the process by which mortgages are handled when water and land title are separated. I am always wary of the word 'streamlined' as there is a slight and subtle difference between the word 'streamline' and the word 'efficient'. From time to time when things are streamlined they do not become more efficient. Instead, things become so simplified that essential parts or essential rights are lost along the way. When boiling down a process, one must be very careful not to burn one's hands on the steam. To explain that analogy, in this instance we have a boiling down of the process of transferring title. This is all well and good and one cannot argue against a process that reduces transaction costs. However, if that reduction of transaction costs comes at the price of the rights of one of the parties involved in the transfer, then the matter is not so clear cut.

Under the new arrangements, as stated by the minister, it will be a matter for the water authorities and their customers to determine the appropriate pricing arrangements that balance two competing interests: on the one hand, the individual farmers' rights to trade their water and, on the other hand, the financial interests of the authority and the remaining customers. This is all well and good. However, it must be made absolutely clear that this is indeed a balance.

I am afraid that, on reading the bill, I do not believe there are sufficient safeguards to ensure that the relationship that I have outlined is one that will always be equitable and a relationship that will not show up

some sort of unbalanced power arrangements where farmers receive a raw deal. I take the point of members on my right—and points well made—about concerns that farmers' rights are being eroded in a way that transcends the benefit that is achieved by streamlining the mortgage transfer process. I would like the minister to address those concerns as it is my belief that the bill in its current state does not sufficiently protect farmers in this process.

Apart from that concern, I believe that the provisions of this bill do a reasonable job in forwarding the aim of the legislation, which is to ensure the sustainability of Queensland's water supply. With those reservations, I conclude my contribution to the House.