



Speech by

John-Paul Langbroek

MEMBER FOR SURFERS PARADISE

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FLUORIDATION OF PUBLIC WATER SUPPLIES AMENDMENT BILL

Mr LANGBROEK (Surfers Paradise—Lib) (11.59 am): I rise to support the Fluoridation of Public Water Supplies Amendment Bill 2005. I have made no apologies for the fact that the fluoridation of Queensland's water is one of my top priorities as a legislator, as a parent and as a qualified dentist. But let us not gild the lily. This bill gives councils something they already have: the right to have a referendum or make a decision on fluoridation without a referendum. Another point that needs stressing is that legislation on other important public health measures—for example, smoking, seatbelts, vaccinations et cetera—is not left in the hands of local governments and neither should water fluoridation.

I introduced a private member's bill into this place last year that proposed the immediate fluoridation of public water supplies in Queensland, a bill which I am glad was debated broadly, with useful contributions made by many members of this House. It was defeated by 70 votes to six. I have noted several councils across Queensland have recently ceased the practice of providing free fluoride tablets to members of their local communities, including the Gold Coast City Council, which concerns me somewhat. They were concerned about liability if they said they could provide them and could not due to a shortage. They said, 'We'd better not say we can provide them and we won't even when they become available,' so our kids are now worse off than ever before. It is more concerning that councils are deciding to stop distributing fluoride tablets, as I just mentioned, when the spiralling levels of decay in our children's teeth are taken into account. These two factors are very good reasons for immediately putting fluoride into Queensland's water supply to literally stop the rot.

The prevailing attitude of government members towards fluoridation has been disappointing. They have been happy to acknowledge that fluoridation is right and should be implemented but then, as a government, they shy away from implementing something that may cause controversy in the community. This unfortunate stance or lack thereof from government members has cascaded down into the bill we are currently debating. The problem I speak of is a deep-seated one. Let us take, for example, the health minister.

The health minister in many ways emulates the federal opposition leader, Kim Beazley. He is continually full of hot air in question time, choosing to attack opposition members instead of answering questions. Yet, when it comes to tough controversial issues such as fluoridation, he is out of touch. He always wants to have a bet each way. He always wants to walk both sides of the street like Mr Beazley. He loves to come in here and berate me for being a new boy who does not understand the standing orders. But I put it to him that, as a long-term member, his lack of respect for the standing orders, his use of the first person in naming people, is far worse than my enthusiastic—

Mr ROBERTSON: I rise to a point of order. Mr Deputy Speaker, I ask you to rule on the relevance of this contribution by the member. I see no section in the bill that talks about standing orders.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Copeland): Order! The member will return to the content of the bill.

Mr LANGBROEK: I conclude by saying that I enthusiastically embrace the standing orders, and I refuse to apologise for that. The health minister said in his second-reading speech on this bill that fluoridation 'is recognised as the safest, most cost effective and equitable intervention available to reduce

tooth decay'. That makes sense to me. I found it more than a little confusing then to note that when the Liberal Party brought a private member's bill—and I was proud to introduce it—before this House to introduce fluoridation immediately he, along with 56 of his Labor colleagues, voted against it.

The Howard government has mocked Mr Beazley for managing to walk both sides of the street on so many issues, but I think our health minister deserves an honourable mention. He is willing to concede that fluoridation is the most effective form of prevention for tooth decay and yet voted against a bill that would introduce it across Queensland. I am sure the parents of Queensland will be shocked to know the political games this minister is playing with their kids' teeth. The health minister criticised my private member's bill for not giving a choice to the people of Queensland on whether fluoride will be introduced and now has told councils, without consulting them first, that in five years time it will be introduced anyway.

I do not want to be unfair to the health minister. There have been many other government members who have been made to look silly by the comments they have made on the public record with regard to fluoridation. I received a letter recently from the Local Government Association of Queensland, which blasted the Beattie government for breaching the state-local government protocol by unilaterally determining their position on this issue. I was scoffed at by the member for Bundamba, who still has not taken me up on the lessons I offered in how to introduce a private member's bill, when I spoke in this place in favour of mandating fluoridation throughout Queensland for not consulting with councils. Yet how embarrassing for the member that her own government has now deliberately done the same thing.

The member for Stafford probably offered the most pointed remarks on this issue when he said that the bill we previously debated in this place on the introduction of water fluoridation reflected 'poor process' because I as a mover did not consult with the LGAQ before bringing the bill before the House. I need not criticise the minister; the member for Stafford has done it for me. The member for Stafford went on to say that if the local authorities did not address the problem of dental decay the state may need to step in. That time is now.

The member for Pumicestone referred to fluoridation without consultation as 'a con job, a real veneer'. In Queensland we now live in the qualified state, not the Smart State—the qualified state because we have ministers who tell qualified truths and who offer qualified choices, such as the qualified choice this health minister is offering councils in telling them they can either implement fluoridation within five years and thus do the government's dirty work or face it occurring in five years time. Why does this government continue to defy the truth that our kids' teeth are rotting and that fluoridated water is the best method of improving our children's teeth universally? If this were a disease with a different name with an occurrence rate of up to twice the national average, there would be an outcry that the government had not acted.

In an advertisement for dental health in Queensland—not that there is a great deal to advertise the way it is being administered by this government—the Premier claims that if a community wants fluoridation his government will make it happen. The Premier neglects to mention that they have no real choice but he is offering them a qualified truth as part of his qualified state program. So, if the people do not have a choice in the long term, why offer it to them and make them believe that they do? It is because the media tart cannot stand to be unpopular.

When this House last debated fluoridating Queensland's water supplies, the then health minister, the member for Sandgate, claimed that the Beattie government's policy with regard to fluoridation supported the introduction of fluoridation only where it received the consent of the community affected. Clearly the Premier's overarching policy of changing stripes to avoid crises overruled the government's health policy. The health minister said that the government supported fluoridation only after proper consultation with local councils and communities—a clear example of the bet each way mentality that dominates the Labor caucus. A stand should be taken by this government now and a decision should be made.

But undoubtedly the member with the most egg on her face is the member for Bundamba. For the benefit of those members not present during her comments on the previous bill, she said this—

The member is talking about mandating ... The member proposes that the state override local government ...

The member went on to say—

I ... ask the member for Surfers Paradise if he has actually consulted with local government in relation to this bill.

Now I ask the member for Bundamba: has her government bothered to consult with councils? Has the government consulted with the Brisbane City Council, or the Ipswich City Council, or the Logan City Council, or the Gold Coast City Council, or the Caloundra City Council, or any other of the 170 councils in this state? The answer is no. The member for Bundamba, once again, is exposed as just another dogmatic, policy-barren member of the Australian Labor Party who has very few positive remarks to contribute to this House and whose frequent and futile interjections reveal a distinct shortcoming in her ability to partake in a rational debate, whining in the background as my good friend the member for Chatsworth says.

The LGAQ labelled this unilateralism by the Premier as 'self-serving, contemptuous and disrespectful' in a letter which I table. In fact, so impressed was the President of the Local Government

Association, Councillor Paul Bell, by the health minister's form that he had this to say in his letter dated 28 October 2005—

Minister Robertson has a history of twisting the truth and breaking commitments in respect of the LGAQ and councils and no longer has my confidence.

He goes on to say—

In central highlands terms he is a redback spider in Local Government's pants—he's nasty, sneaky and you never know where he is going to bite you next.

That is hardly a glowing endorsement of the health minister from the Local Government Association. I do take heart, though, from the fact that the minister will be able to get some advice from the member for Bundamba on how best to consult local councils.

I still recall the member for Bundamba shrieking at me, 'Did you consult the councils?' It appears now as though the councils are not too happy with the consultative processes of this government. That consultation probably will not do a great deal for the government though, as Councillor Bell has said that the LGAQ sees no particular merit in continuing with the protocol. I know I have been tough on the government, but it ought to be congratulated because only incompetence of historic proportions could frustrate the LGAQ such that it sees the established protocol as no longer tenable.

Hypocrisy is one thing that creates more cynicism amongst the general public. Why is the health minister pretending to give Queensland councils a choice over whether or not to fluoridate their water whilst making it compulsory to do so in five years time? A succession of government members stood in this place claiming that to not give the people a choice would be completely wrong, and now they propose to do exactly the same thing in five years. So the minister has a baseball bat in his hands but he does not have the fortitude to use it for five years. The vexatious issue of fluoride will continue. It is my prediction that no or very few councils will be able to make the decision to vote on this themselves and fluoridate as a result because of the highly emotive nature of the anti-fluoridation lobby, which will affect their decisions as councillors because they will be concerned about being re-elected.

We have seen how this government has reacted when presented with the opportunity of improving our kids' teeth in the face of the anti-fluoridation lobby. It has cowered and proposed a flip-flop, bet-each-way piece of legislation that seeks to put the weight of this issue on the shoulders of others. Logan City Council voted against this last September, eight to three. Similarly with a referendum, the emotive nature of the debate causes people to throw up their hands and stick with the status quo. The other examples of this are daylight saving, the republic and the GST. If we do not have something and enough anti arguments are put forward, people will say, 'We don't want it.'

Another major problem I have with this legislation is that it proposes to put the financial burden of water fluoridation on Queensland councils. Why did the health minister make the case for water fluoridation by referring to evidence that supports its positive effects and then palm off the cost to local councils? While the health minister was right in claiming that water fluoridation could be achieved at an annual cost of less than \$2 per person, this is the precise reason the state government should be paying for fluoridation—to show that the government is really serious about making Queensland the healthiest of all states and that it is not just a 'ministry of hot air'.

The latest update on water fluoridation from the Australian Dental Association of Queensland makes the point that arranging for councils to hold referendums prior to introducing fluoridation is both expensive and impractical. The Tasmanian royal commission into the fluoridation of public water supplies stated that responsibility for water fluoridation should be taken by state governments, not local governments.

The Queensland state legislation covering water fluoridation was passed way back in 1964. It is a model that is unique in Australia in that we are the only state that puts full responsibility for the fluoridation of public water supplies in the hands of local governments. The ADAQ rightly says that to hide behind this legislation, which is more than 40 years old, is 'simply an abrogation of the state government's responsibility'. The fact of the matter is that this government needs to act with the level of authority and responsibility expected by the people and rule on the matter of fluoridation and not pass the buck to councils.

This government loves to take policies from other states, so let us look at what Forster had to say about that. In his final report on page 52 under the heading 'Water fluoridation—engaging the public debate' he says—

Responsibility for fluoridation of Queensland drinking water rests with local governments. In every other state and territory the responsibility for decisions related to water fluoridation resides with the state or territory governments. Capital costs are funded by the state or territory governments and the recurrent costs are generally borne by local governments.

The task force on fluoridation set up by former Brisbane Lord Mayor Jim Soorley found that the cost benefit of water fluoridation was likely to be substantial. The report found that if all towns with populations greater than 5,000 were to be fluoridated the state would save more than \$1 billion over 30 years. Mr Foley aptly highlights that even if the issue of tooth decay does not affect us directly it is still a responsibility for all taxpayers because we are all paying for the epidemic of tooth decay in Queensland. At present

\$132 million is spent annually on funding public dental health services through Queensland Health. This is anomalous with other states and territories, but it is clearly not meeting the demand for public dental health services. The Minister for Health in his second-reading speech said—

The bill represents an important step in ensuring improved oral health for all Queenslanders by removing the perceived legislative restrictions on access to fluoridated water.

Most of the general public would be able to see through this and realise that what the minister is effectively doing is wiping clean the hands of the Queensland government on this issue and leaving the tough decisions to other people. The old adage goes that there is no moral difference between those partaking in evil deeds and those who witness these deeds and do nothing about it. The same applies here.

The health minister and government members have acknowledged that fluoridation is the right thing to do. Then I say: have the ticker and do it. Mr Beazley has been proven not to have any political ticker on tough issues but it should not be that, just because it copies his action on walking both sides of the street, this government needs to emulate him in not having any ticker. Michael Foley has said that it is easy to argue that tooth decay is 'not my problem' at a personal level, but if this government is being honest when it says that it is concerned with the future of public health in our state it should be legislating to immediately fluoridate Queensland's water supplies rather than giving the councils the qualified choice I spoke of earlier.

An article in the *Australian* of 14 November entitled 'Rot sets in over fluoride deadline' highlights the problems that can occur when there is ambiguity over where the decision-making responsibilities lie on fluoridation. The article outlines that in New South Wales the decision to fluoridate lies with local governments, not the state government. However, councils that cannot reach a decision on fluoridation can refer the matter to New South Wales Health to make the decision on their behalf. Five councils were directed by New South Wales Health in May to put fluoride in their water by November. Four of them failed to meet this deadline but are now complying and the fifth, Gosford City Council, is refusing outright despite, the article notes, the city having a higher rate of tooth decay than neighbouring towns. A study by the Australian Research Centre for Population Oral Health of 250,000 children in New South Wales revealed last month that almost 70 per cent of children living in non-fluoridated areas had more dental decay.

The minister said in his second-reading speech that in the circumstances where a water supply and treatment plant is shared between two or more councils, such as in south-east Queensland, the decision would be made by a number of councils. I would like to know whether what the minister proposes may occur in a shared situation where one council is in favour of fluoridation and the other is not. Possibly the minister can address this in his reply.

The Premier, in answering a question from the member for Gladstone on 10 November said that in a number of already fluoridated communities, such as Thuringowa and Townsville, the people did not appear to be suffering any side effects of fluoridation. In fact, the only side effect apart from fluorosis that I know of would be better teeth. This was acknowledged by Peter Forster, who referred to evidence that children between five and 12 in Townsville had 45 per cent less tooth decay than children of the same age group in Brisbane, where water is not fluoridated. What a frustrating message the Queensland people must be getting. They have elected a government that is willing to acknowledge fluoridation of public water supplies as good public policy but that is then unwilling to sully its hands implementing it. Peter Forster said in his review of Queensland Health, at recommendation 3.5—

The Queensland Government should engage with the Queensland community to clarify what the community expects from its health system, what it is prepared to pay and how it is prepared to pay for it. This needs to occur in the context of Queensland Health developing comprehensive health service planning and development of options with the community.

So he is saying that we should have a debate because the dental system cannot cope. We spend more on dental health than any other state, but our teeth are the worst. Forster then says, under the heading 'Water fluoridation—engaging in a public debate'—

Oral health is provided as an example of a public health debate Queenslanders have not managed to have in a meaningful way.

They have had it in an emotive way, coloured by histrionics and exacerbated by the Australian Labor Party members in this House. Forster then goes on to say—

All too frequently, the threat of controversy and a failure to understand the consequences of alternative choices subordinates the need for informed decision making and action.

So we have a government that says it is dealing with this issue, but with this bill we are not really dealing with it—or at least not for five years. But the government will say, 'We have implemented recommendation 3.5.' We all understand that good public policy is often controversial. The tough gun laws implemented by the Prime Minister in the wake of the tragic events that occurred at Port Arthur were very controversial but, I think we will all agree, necessary. In the same vein, the continual deterioration of our kids' teeth will only escalate as a problem until this government stops the rot and implements policies that, while being controversial, are, as many government members have agreed, in the long-term interest of our state. Being a good representative is about standing firm on what you believe. I implore the health minister to immediately fluoridate Queensland's water supply if that is what he and the government believe in. I

know that the Premier does. I refer to page 4171 of *Hansard* from Wednesday, 23 November 2005, when he said—

We are in favour of fluoridation.

He has had a conversion, like the apostle Paul on the road to Damascus. Last December he doubted the science when he said that the government would not be supporting the fluoridation bill that the Liberal Party brought into this House. When I introduced a private member's bill into this place last year, the debate that ensued was confusing. I have already spoken about how the health minister walks both sides of the street, but it appears that he is not alone. Government member after government member rose and spoke on the previous fluoridation bill, telling the House that they supported the fluoridation but only if local councils and the people were consulted. In a letter to the member for Nicklin, the Premier said that fluoridation was not a matter for a conscience vote. It is, however, a matter of conscience for government members, because it is they who have stood and one after the other said that fluoridation is the right thing to be done but have refused to mandate it.

This is a conscience issue because the ongoing pain Queensland kids and the whole community will suffer as a result of the government refusing to implement fluoridation will be and should be on their conscience for a long time to come. All I can say is that I hope that the 57 government members who voted against the previous private member's bill will vote against the bill before this House if they want to be consistent. But I will be proudly voting for it, as anything that can aid our children's and the community's teeth I will enthusiastically embrace.