



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR SURFERS PARADISE

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WATER AMENDMENT BILL

Mr LANGBROEK (Surfers Paradise—Lib) (9.24 pm): Before I begin, wearing my other hat as the shadow minister for public works, housing and racing I would like to acknowledge the Deputy Chairman of the Gold Coast Turf Club, Brian O'Hara, and his wife, Lindy, and fellow friends Paul and Robyn Valmadre. Welcome to the Queensland parliament.

I rise this evening to speak to the Water Amendment Bill 2006, which amends the Water Act 2000 to create the Queensland Water Commission. Some observers have noted that currently it is not clear which entity is responsible for ensuring regional water supply security. In fact, of the 19 water storages in south-east Queensland, 12 different bodies share ownership. Any sort of uncertainty usually acts as a barrier to slow any process of change and action. So with respect to the objective to clarify and get on with the job of fixing the water crisis in Queensland, the coalition will be supporting this bill, subject to suggested amendments, as I know the shadow minister for natural resources and water has suggested today.

I acknowledge the fact that in early March when the Premier met with the chair of the council of mayors of south-east Queensland and other local government representatives from south-east Queensland they agreed with the approach of establishing a commission—an independent, expertise based commission of at least three members. The commission that this bill will establish will carry out regional assessments of options for water supply sources and demand management measures in south-east Queensland from which it will develop water security options.

Division 6 of the bill allows for the minister to direct the commission to operate in parts of Queensland other than the south-east region as well. In layman's terms, this means that the commission is an advisory body that will advise the minister on matters such as infrastructure development, retrofitting water-saving devices and other issues relating to water supply and demand management. Importantly, under clause 9, it will also set restrictions on water usage in circumstances where it considers it necessary in the interests of ensuring security of water supply. In layman's terms, this means that taking that responsibility away from local councils will probably produce a more consistent approach to restrictions across the region. The commission is determinative rather than advisory with regard to being able to set these restrictions.

Let us keep this bill in perspective. This bill really has nothing to do with dams and everything to do with the fact that the Labor Party wants to look like it is doing something about water. This bill will allow the Premier to stand in front of the cameras and say, 'The Queensland government has today passed the Water Amendment Bill,' a cleverly labelled piece of legislation that implies it is amending something about water. It is a triumph of spin over substance. The bill does not deal with a dam or a pipeline. It is not going to build a dam or pipeline. This bill has been rushed in so Labor could look like it was doing something.

During the Premier's second reading speech on this bill when he rushed in just before lunch on 21 April, the member for Burdekin and I were sitting in the House listening to the Premier's speech and the member for Burdekin drew the Speaker's attention to the state of the House. Unfortunately, a quorum was not present. In what could only be described as a comment charged by the disappointment that his own party had not bothered to turn up in the House to support the bill's second reading and in contradiction to

the rhetoric that the Premier has been jamming down Queenslanders' throats that the Labor Party is indeed focused on the water issue, he was so upset that his party was not in the House that he thought he may as well try to shift the focus to this side of the House, labelling our following of proper procedure as 'a bit pathetic'. He went on to call it 'a stupid point'. What is pathetic here are two things. The first is the disrespect shown by those opposite regarding the procedure of this House. To suggest that the following of those established rules is pathetic in an attempt to hide the fact that the majority of the Labor Party was absent from the House is indeed truly pathetic.

Mr Shine interjected.

Mr LANGBROEK: I say to the member for Toowoomba North that I can always get 16. Secondly, it highlights the lack of follow-through and priorities of the Queensland Labor Party with regard to water as truly pathetic. Despite listening to the Premier and his members who arc up with 'hear, hear!' when the cameras are present in response to the supposed fact that Labor is addressing the water issue, they did not even turn up to form a quorum and allow the Premier to present his second reading speech. On water Labor is all for show, and this bill is the latest illustration. This bill may achieve clarification which is worthwhile, and it is a baby step in the right direction, but it has been introduced for the Labor Party's health rather than the health of the water system, which needs immediate and more significant care.

Attention shifting has not been the only shifting exercise related to this bill. The other shifting is cost shifting. Water service providers will pay for the new Water Commission via an annual levy as prescribed in section 7. In layman's terms local council will foot the bill for the commission which means that ratepayers will undoubtedly be forking out more.

Noosa mayor, Bob Abbott, has said that it is the state government's responsibility to fund the commission. He is not alone in his objection to this cost shifting. The Lord Mayor of Brisbane, Campbell Newman, opposes the levy. Redcliffe mayor, Allan Sutherland, has said it is just another water thing he has found out about second-hand. The executive director of the Council of Mayors SEQ, Jon Black, understood the matter was not agreed upon. The president of the Local Government Association, Paul Bell, only remembers the issue being raised but not endorsed or discussed. These sentiments as reported in the *Courier-Mail* highlight that, whilst the approach of a commission was agreed upon in the hope of clarifying current uncertainty about who is responsible for what, slugging ratepayers with a bill was certainly not agreed upon.

I would like to use this opportunity to outline the suggested amendments to the legislation as recommended by the director of Gold Coast Water. He points out that there is very weak reference to water quality currently in the bill. Furthermore, no reference has been made to flood mitigation despite this issue being part of the local government submission. With regard to the restrictions the commission can pass, they can only be made with regard to climatic conditions and long-term water conservation requirements. Gold Coast Water recommends that this needs to be expanded to encompass any strategic risk to water security across the region such as terrorism, water quality and asset failure. It was also noted that the reporting arrangements for the commission are weak. The commission is not required to develop business continuity plans for strategic risks but is required to give advance notice of its intent to implement restrictions.

The Queensland coalition understands that we have to fix the water crisis that this government has, by waiting too long to act in respect of our drought, inflicted on Queenslanders. We have to fix it but let us recognise that this commission, which will have a positive effect, is an administrative step. It is a politically charged step. It is not a significant development in water infrastructure. It is not going to build a dam.

Yes, the commission will be able to advise the minister on infrastructure but that is all that is afforded. Funding issues and broader public interest considerations demand that the government make the final decisions. Maybe this is further evidence that the Labor policy has not changed and it still believes building dams is dinosaurian.

This bill to create a commission is just to show it is doing something. We can predict what is going to happen in the coming months. It will start with, 'We have created a commission to tell us about dams.' When the government still does not have a dam plan in six months it will say, 'The commission is still going to get back to us.' When the dam is delayed it will say, 'Oh, well, the commission said that site was not appropriate; we are now evaluating others.' It will go on and on.

The commission will be the government's fall-back position. It will point to it and say, 'We set up a commission. We are doing something,' but will not point out that the final decisions still lie with the minister and the government. The commission is afforded determinative water restriction imposition powers but not with regard to infrastructure developments et cetera. I am not saying the commission should have those powers, but I do not want the commission to be used as the government's scapegoat when it does not deliver. At some stage we know that the government will say it is the federal government's fault. So we will have attention shifting, blame shifting, cost shifting, jurisdiction shifting and we may even have realm shifting.

Mr Seeney: But no water.

Mr LANGBROEK: I take that interjection from the shadow minister. No water, that is right. We may even have realm shifting. The man who likens himself to Jesus Christ, the Premier, in dealing with Cyclone Larry no doubt blames his father for the climate change that he has suddenly become aware of after eight years of inaction. The people of Queensland deserve better than this triumph of spin over substance.