



Speech by

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Hansard Tuesday, 9 May 2006

WATER AMENDMENT BILL

Ms LEE LONG (Tablelands—ONP) (9.13 pm): I wish to contribute to this debate on the Water Amendment Bill 2006, which is about one of the essentials of life itself. This bill discusses the creation of a new commission, a new bureaucracy, with the explanatory notes referring to cost sharing, pricing, transparent decision-making processes and a host of other bureaucratic and policy related issues. But we must not lose sight of the simple fact that water, essential to life and industry, is what we are really discussing here. We also need to remember that each and every decision we make here is made under the umbrella—indeed, under the rigid direction—of the National Water Initiative.

It is well worth outlining the background to the water policy in Queensland. That background was set down in 1994 under Labor in Canberra and Labor in Queensland when the Council of Australian Governments, COAG, set down an agreement on the future direction of water reforms. This led to the 1995 agreement to implement the national competition policy and related reforms which included water. National competition policy payments were made contingent on the implementation of these reforms. That, in turn, grew into the 2004 Intergovernmental Agreement on a National Water Initiative. It is this process that is driving the new water charges that are crippling Queensland and crippling the bush. We need to remember that this is all being done under the COAG process headed up by the federal Liberal-National government today. The Howard-Vaile endorsement of this initiative means those in the official opposition in Queensland, the Nationals and the Liberals, are already signed-up believers in the same process as much as those members on my left, the Labor Party.

The people of Queensland, including the people of the bush, will get the same rough deal from the Liberals and their akubra-wearing mates as they are getting from the ALP, and that is a shameful state of affairs. We have had a long litany of papers, discussions, proposals and so on regarding water management in Queensland. A discussion paper on future rural water pricing for SunWater schemes was released in November 2003. There was a review of the value of water announced in January 2004. A water resource charges discussion paper was released in July 2004. In August last year the Premier released the Queensland Water Plan 2005-10. But, even while all these discussions and reviews were going on, my electorate was battling through the Barron water resource planning process. What we got after nearly 10 years of so-called expert work was a document that claimed there was less water under some farms than they were in fact already successfully extracting—a document that said there was no need for any new dam in the area for at least the next decade; a document that said extra water was available below Tinaroo Dam but that it was all set aside for the urbanised centre of Cairns; a document that said, while there was extra water available above the dam, no-one knew how to allocate it to irrigators. We got a document which said that area based licences were to be converted to volumetric licences at a rate insufficient for viable farming. I ask: are there any friends of the farmers left anymore?

It is important to mention these things in the context of this bill to highlight the severely flawed theories behind the way water is being managed in Queensland and the very poor results these policies are delivering to Queenslanders. In terms of the allocation of above-dam water and the area based to volumetric based conversion ratio, a local group of irrigators has been meeting for some years now with the department of natural resources and mines. It sounds like a nice idea, but all it has done is give the

impression that the DNRMW is listening to stakeholders and trying to find solutions. In reality, the department is committed to its own ideas and just will not budge. The result: no solutions; just stagnation.

For this bill to talk about transparent decision making and implementation frameworks for the management of water supply and demand in Queensland is, on past records, just a joke. It is fascinating and horrifying in a way to see the growing disparity between how rural Queensland is dealt with compared to the crowded south-east. We are told that we have to pay for the full cost of our water. No more subsidies, no more support; it is all going to be user pays for water, which is such an essential to life itself. Yet here in the south-east there are subsidised theatres, subsidised museums, subsidised sporting stadiums, free pedestrian bridges and subsidised public transport to name just a few. But in the bush it is 'pay up and pay up some more' for the full cost recovery.

This bill before us today is based on a call in the South East Queensland Regional Plan for review of institutional arrangements for water supply in the south-east. That review is examining planning for water security, water sharing and entitlements; cost sharing, pricing and economic regulation; and asset ownership and integration. I note in the explanatory notes the statement that one of the problems with the current planning model is in fact that there is no entity clearly responsible for ensuring regional water supply security. But there is. It is called the government of the day, more specifically the minister for natural resources and his department. If there is a failure in this area, the responsibility still rests with him. This is just ducking and weaving. This is an ALP government faced with the parched results of its own water policy failures looking for an easy way out.

This bill will establish the Water Commission, described as an independent, expert based body of at least three members with backgrounds in relevant areas. It will have four main roles: to undertake regional assessment of options for water supply sources and demand management measures; to facilitate and implement regional water security programs approved and published by the minister; to ensure relevant parties comply with the regional water security program; and to set restrictions on usage and circumstances where it considers them necessary to ensure security of water supply. It may also deal with other matters referred to it by the minister.

It is an enormously broad range of functions, and its ability to ensure compliance brings it into the enforcement arena as well. It is not confined to the south-east. This commission will be able to address water security issues in other parts of Queensland if the minister wishes. I have to say, it begs the question: what will the minister and his department be left to do, and what value does any of its existing work have, especially when it is the inadequacies of that work which prompted the creation of this new body?

In my electorate we have a water resource planning process underway. The Barron River catchment has gone through this process, as have some other river systems. It was eventually to apply to all and it was to address the kinds of things this commission is now going to do. What is happening here has little to do with water planning and everything to do with the Beattie government putting itself at arm's length from its own repeated failures in this area. It will not be the Beattie government that makes the harsh decisions. It will not be the Beattie government that slams down draconian restrictions. It will not be the Beattie government that sends water rates soaring. It will be the Beattie government standing, hand on heart, and claiming, 'It is not our fault. We are only doing what the commission tells us is necessary.' The Beattie government has been in power for almost a decade and the ALP for most of the past 18 years. So it is, shamefully, its fault.

There is also a very valid issue in the way this commission is to be handed a role in relation to the entire state. It comes out of a planning process confined to the south-east which is in response to specifically south-east issues. Yet out of nowhere this bill may stretch its powers over the entire state.

I now turn to the provisions of this bill. Clause 3 amends section 25M relating to appointing a person to carry out measures or achieve outcomes. It notes that the bill creates in section 360ZD(2) a separate power for the commission to impose its own water restrictions on top of those that may be imposed by the water service provider. This is of great concern. We could now have two sets of restrictions, two sets of offences if breached and more confusion—another sign of how badly this essential resource has been managed and will continue to be managed by the Beattie government.

Clause 9 inserts a new chapter 2A, which provides that the main purpose of this chapter is to ensure the delivery of sustainable and secure water supply and demand management in south-east Queensland and other designated regions. This will be achieved mainly by making and implementing regional water security programs and the establishment of this new commission. It is section 360D which provides that the minister may publish a notice in the gazette designating a region for which the commission is to perform its functions. The explanatory notes indicate that the south-east Queensland region will not require designation and that the commission can begin work there immediately after the commencement of this bill. For the rest of the state, however, all it will take is a listing in the gazette and this commission will be able to look at any aspect of water supply and demand management.

How will the commission be funded? Section 360F provides for an annual levy on each water provider for the purpose of funding the commission's activities. The amount is to be set by regulation. The provider will, ultimately, pass on those costs to irrigators, the people on town water, families watering their lawns and industry. They will all be hit up to help pay for this new commission, this new body, that is now being set up. Transparency? Equity? What a joke! When it comes to good government, when it comes to good resource management, it has been a long time between drinks for Team Beattie.