



Speech by

Rosemary Menkens

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

Hansard Wednesday, 10 May 2006

WATER AMENDMENT BILL

Mrs MENKENS (Burdekin—NPA) (12.52 pm): I rise to make my contribution to the Water Amendment Bill 2006. I certainly support the comments and the points made by the member for Callide and other members of the coalition.

The purpose of this bill is to establish a framework to create the Queensland Water Commission. It is a shame that the Premier has brought this bill before the House in its current form. But we must remember that it has been eight long years of procrastination and failure to plan that has forced the Beattie Labor government to take such desperate steps to rectify a situation that is of its own making. It has been eight long years, culminating in the Premier, in desperation, finally having to act and doing far too little far too late. It has been eight years in which opportunity and resources have been squandered, pandering to the green movement instead of investing in Queensland's future. It actually must be rather embarrassing for the Premier to bring a bill of this importance to the House in its present unresearched, unfinished and unworkable form.

No-one can deny that desperate times call for desperate measures. Sadly, we seem to have come to desperate times. The intent of this bill to address the water crisis existing in the south east is admirable. But it addresses the symptoms, not the root cause of the crisis.

Let us be perfectly clear about this. The crisis is not due to drought, the crisis is not due to irresponsible water use and the crisis is not because water users do not realise the value of water. It is a direct and inevitable consequence of the singular and shameful failure of the Beattie government to plan. The Premier cannot blame drought. Drought has been and always will be a feature of Queensland's climate. To claim that it is the major factor in this crisis is disingenuous, at least.

Governments are supposed to plan for the future—the inevitable and the probable. A government is entrusted by its constituents to care for their welfare. It has the responsibility to maximise their future. I imagine that residents of the south east who face level 4 water restrictions and the many businesspeople and farmers who face huge losses due to low water supplies would not feel that this government has met its responsibility. Instead, because of its short-sightedness and its willingness to bend over backwards to appease a minority green movement, people feel let down, abandoned and helpless in the face of a water crisis the scale of which has never been seen before in Queensland.

Instead of a far-sighted and strategic plan for future water catchments and supply, with a firm and workable direction that caters for Queensland's growth, once again we are witnessing reactionary policy on the run, Beattie-style, that will take several years to have any measurable effect. This process should have started eight years ago—not today, when most of the few dams that we have are empty.

The bill does not give any security. It does not give us one extra drop of water. It does not give clarity and surety to the residents of the south east or, given its open-ended provisions, to the rest of Queensland. I suppose it is gratifying that the Premier has belatedly realised the gravity of the situation and the very real concerns of residents and is at least attempting to redress the previous gross neglect by this government.

What will this bill actually achieve? That is my query. It may, through the establishment of a Queensland Water Commission, in time address issues and put forward viable solutions to the many

problems that face south-east water consumers. However, it will also open the door for a greater impost by this government on regional water supply schemes.

As it stands, the bill allows an unelected and unrepresentative body, in the form of the new commission, with direction only from the minister, to dictate how, when and where it will operate in the future. The explanatory notes to the bill contain the astounding statement that no entity is clearly responsible for ensuring regional supply security. Pardon me, but I find that sentence to be truly staggering. Is that not one of the primary roles of government? Does this Labor government really believe that it does not have this responsibility? Perhaps a Water Commission will accept this responsibility—and I hope it does—because I, and many others, have lost all faith in this government's ability and willingness to do so.

I also note that the minister may refer to the commission for advice. No doubt that is a welcome development, given the demonstrated deficiency of many of this government's ministers to listen to any advice until far too late. Further, the commission may, at the minister's referral, instigate water security issues in other areas of the state, including demand management measures. The Premier has my total support to ensure that our water is used wisely and efficiently. However, the means by which this may be achieved scare me and certainly scare my colleagues.

As the bill is worded, the commission—without any consultation with councils, water users or local water supply bodies—may recommend measures that it considers consistent with reducing water use. These measures do not exclude the arbitrary raising of prices and charges to create artificial price barriers to water consumption. Most Queensland water users—urban, business and especially agricultural—already have a fairly good idea of the cost and value of water and do not need to be reminded. They already have best management practices in place to minimise wastage and increase efficiency. The imposition of further price rises to teach them a lesson is badly misguided.