



Speech by

Rosemary Menkens

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

Hansard Thursday, 11 May 2006

WATER AMENDMENT BILL

Mrs MENKENS (Burdekin—NPA) (7.30 pm): I will continue from where I left off—

Mr Reeves: That seems like a long time ago!

Mrs MENKENS: Absolutely. The problem is not, as stated in proposed section 346, that water is a scarce resource. The real problem is the lack of well-designed, well-placed water impoundment schemes to catch and reticulate the water that is currently being lost every time it rains.

This bill contains a few more nasties that will send shivers down the spine of many local water scheme operators. It provides harsh penalties for those schemes that the commission identifies as having failed to meet system operating plans. The fact that the scheme in question may have had no input into the drafting or viability or practicality of the scheme makes little difference, it would seem. That they may have had unreasonable costs or operating conditions imposed upon them will not be a factor in their defence. The fact that local supply schemes in my electorate—for example, the South Burdekin Water Board and the North Burdekin Water Board—already operate more efficiently and economically than SunWater ever can will carry no weight. The idea that the commission, with absolutely no requirement to liaise or consult with bodies such as water boards, can impose and inflict requirements on them is surely central control gone mad. This is what this bill has the ability to put into place. The fact is that the commission will become judge and jury and the minister the de facto executioner of any who find it difficult or impossible to comply with their mandated requirements.

Proposed section 346 also says that the commission must have specific regard to several principles, among them that water supply operations should maximise efficient use of water. No problems there whatsoever, one would think, until one reads further and finds that the definition of 'efficient use of water' in section 10, part 3 of the act includes 'measures that achieve permanent and reliable reductions in demand for water'. It is one small provision among many but it is one that truly indicates this government's direction and attitude. Do not plan for growth, do not plan for expansion, close the borders and put up the 'house full' sign, because this Labor government will not and cannot guarantee that there will be enough for all.

Instead of building capacity and infrastructure the minister plans to tell people to drink less, businesses to do less, farmers and irrigators to grow less and councils to supply less. If that is not enough, we find that we are not even to be given this advice and direction free and gratis. No, in the much-treasured way of this government, we are to be charged for this service. There is no mention of exactly who and how much, of course; that will come later. But we have no doubt that eventually each and every Queenslander will find they will have to part with more to be served with less.

An interesting provision, again contained within proposed section 346, is that cost sharing and pricing should be shared among users who benefit directly and indirectly from the water source. This will come as very welcome news to those water users in the Burdekin River irrigation area who, through a not very subtle introduction by this government of legislation designed to circumvent the judicial process, are forced to pay full rates of return on their supply. It will also be welcomed by those potential users of the water from the Bowen scheme who will, I gather, no longer have to bear the full cost of the scheme entirely

on their own. Can I now look forward to the Premier's coming announcement of the new measures that he will put in place so that all who benefit from the scheme will pay, not just those first in line?

Several other parts of this bill worry me. Proposed section 355 says that the commission may conduct its business in the way that it considers appropriate. Are there to be no checks and balances? Is there to be no oversight? Will it truly be answerable and responsible to no-one? I think the Premier may have to amend this section in the interests of probity, if nothing else. Proposed section 360B states that the commission may utilise through secondments the services of officers or employees of state government departments, local councils or other units of public administration. Proposed section 360C states further that it may establish advisory bodies it considers appropriate but that these bodies will be advisory only. That is the interesting part. These bodies will be advisory only. Fair enough, one would think, until we remember that proposed section 360F provides for an as yet undetermined annual levy on water service providers so that the commission, and presumably its secondment and advisory bodies, can be funded. Mr Deputy Speaker, I do not know about you but I do not know of too many suppliers who will give anyone a blank cheque, let alone a quango established by this government with such loose terms of reference.

Proposed section 360D provides that the minister may publish a notice in the gazette designating a region for which the commission is to perform its function. Is the Premier worried that news about the commission's operations may be so worrying to suppliers and users alike that it must operate under a veil of secrecy? Why can the commission not operate candidly and openly so that we may all be aware of just what it is doing? Proposed section 360J provides that the commission must address numerous issues of just what water service providers will be required to do under the new legislation. Apart from dictating just how they will operate without needing to consult with providers, it inserts a new definition concerning demand management. Essentially, it states that it will involve measures to reduce overall water use. Surely this is a misprint. Instead of determining ways to increase our present woeful water storage capacity to allow the state to grow, the Premier is arguing that the state should instead be allowed to stagnate like the remaining water in these near-empty dams. Are we seriously expected to accept that the way through this self-imposed crisis is not to increase capacity but to reduce consumption?

Ensuring water efficiency is admirable, and it is necessary and we must do it, but it entirely misses the point. This government has failed to cater for growth, and it still cannot recognise the urgent need for increasing available water supplies. Proposed section 360Q is somewhat more worrisome for those under the increasingly inefficient and overly bureaucratic reign of SunWater. It provides for the designation of a preferred entity for the purpose of constructing or carrying out water supply works subject to a regional water security program. Will this allow the government to nominate SunWater as its preferred entity and take over existing schemes? Will it mean that the commission, acting in isolation and without oversight, may proclaim a water security scheme and then the government could automatically assume control? If this is not the intent, I would suggest that significant amendments are needed to negate this possibility. As this bill is read, that is a distinct possibility.

Proposed section 360S, as it stands, will allow the commission to conduct reviews of regional water supply schemes as and when it sees fit. There is no requirement for mandatory views, much less a set format or time frame. This only reinforces the view that the commission will be unaccountable and responsible to absolutely no-one. Section 360W gives the commission carte blanche to override already existing schemes and authorities and impose its own version of system operator plans and rules for any particular region's water supply system. This is again going to be without any need to refer to or to consult local authorities, users and suppliers.

The really dangerous part of the section—I repeat: the really dangerous part of this section—is that it is clearly stated that section 360W in no way limits what may be included in a plan. So we will potentially be faced with an autocratic, unaccountable and unelected body that will have complete and overall say on how water is to be managed across the state with no checks and plans and no need to ever review its operations. Unless and until this bill is brought before the House in a workable fashion we have a potential nightmare on our hands.

There can be no doubt that the water supply situation in the south-east is in desperate need of solutions. There is also no doubt that the blame lies squarely at the feet of this government and not the weather gods. The establishment of a commission to oversee and determine the infrastructure needed to guarantee future water supply is one small, late and inadequate but necessary step in fixing this government's monumental blunders. To be in charge of the most prosperous state in Australia, with its massive potential, and to fail to plan even in the most rudimentary way is to fail its people.

Along with accountability goes responsibility. The government has shown itself to be lacking in one and denying the other. This bill, while necessary, is flawed. It would be the height of irresponsibility to let it proceed, without the necessary amendments, in order to secure another one of the Premier's quick fixes. The present government has brought us to this state in eight long years. I really do not think Queensland can afford another three.