



Speech by

**Stuart Copeland**

**MEMBER FOR CUNNINGHAM**

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## **WATER AMENDMENT BILL**

**Mr COPELAND** (Cunningham—NPA) (12.19 pm): I rise to participate in the debate on the Water Amendment Bill 2006. The policy objective of the legislation as set out in the explanatory notes accompanying the bill is to amend the Water Act 2000 to establish a transparent decision making and implementation framework for the management of water supply and demand in Queensland through the creation of the Queensland Water Commission.

Ever since I have been a member—and that is almost 5½ years now—water has been a major issue in my electorate. During my first election campaign water was an enormous issue, particularly in the agricultural areas of my electorate. Even then the issue of water was surrounded with controversy. An enormous amount of work was being done by the water users—the irrigators—in the agricultural areas of the Darling Downs and that work continues today. It is something that will continue forever as we push for increased efficiencies, increased returns and equality of water use.

Way back then I can remember highlighting the fact that we needed water infrastructure not only for agricultural and industrial uses but also for domestic consumption in our metropolitan areas. I remember often saying that this Labor government will not construct water infrastructure such as dams until the political cost of not doing it outweighs the political cost of doing it. In those times the political cost was way too high because it saw any proposal to build a dam as meaning the potential loss of green votes in major metropolitan areas.

It was always going to be only when Brisbane and the south-east corner were threatened with a diminished water supply that we were going to see any infrastructure built. That is where we find ourselves now. It is only because of the imminent crisis engulfing Brisbane and the south-east corner that this government, all of a sudden, is realising that it does have a problem on its hands and the political cost of not building dams is now far greater than the political cost of building them.

I am glad that we finally have some sort of commitment to build dams in Queensland because it is a significant step and one that we on this side have always recognised the need for. In this chamber we have always been arguing for the need to build that water infrastructure. Like the farmers in my electorate who have been working so hard on planning and on the science to make sure that what they are doing is right we also need to make sure that the building of dams is based on science. I note the comments made by the shadow minister, the member for Callide, regarding the state government's two preferred sites announced in the last couple of weeks and the fact that they have not been on the preferred list of sites for some years.

We have seen time and time again, regardless of the project, the crisis or the problem that this government is faced with, that the concern of the government is to make sure that it appears as if it is doing something and that it creates the perception that it is doing something and takes the issue off the political agenda. I have been here long enough now to have seen that tactic over and over again. This certainly smacks of that. This morning we have seen again the telegraphing of the punches of the government. It is going to approve the dams but it is going to blame the federal government if it knocks it back. When the science has not been completed, who knows what will happen?

The Water Commission will be established to cover the south-east Queensland area. There is an anomaly. The South East Queensland Regional Plan and urban footprint includes the Toowoomba City Council. It is quite happy to be included because of the planning issues. Notwithstanding that, there are a lot of questions about the implementation of the south-east Queensland plan. Toowoomba is included in that footprint. It is not however covered by the Water Commission. Given the very serious water crisis that is engulfing our city, which everyone in this chamber knows about, I would have thought that it would have made sense that Toowoomba be covered by the commission and work with it in a cooperative way.

As the member for Toowoomba South said yesterday, the water that we draw upon for our city and that the shires around Toowoomba city draw upon is from the catchment area covered by the Water Commission. I have argued for some time that Toowoomba sits in a unique position. We need to cooperate with those councils and those people in the south-east corner when it comes to water because we largely draw our water from that catchment. We also need to have a regional focus when it comes to water from Toowoomba west into the Darling Downs. There are significant water resources that are used for a whole range of purposes, whether that be industrial or agricultural purposes. We need to make sure that a regional approach is taken and that we are gaining the maximum benefit from the water that is available.

Having now visited the gas fields around the Chinchilla area I find the amount of water being wasted there unbelievable. It is evaporating off. It is not being used. At a time when we are struggling to get water for all purposes, whether industrial, agricultural or domestic, it is absolutely crazy for us to be wasting it. We need to have a regional approach to water to make sure that we are making the most of the water resources that are available to us.

Toowoomba is facing a real crisis when it comes to water. People in this chamber will not be surprised by that. They have heard that many times from all the local members on both sides of the House. I have to say that the proposal that has been put forward to recycle sewage water into the drinking supply at a rate of 25 per cent has really split the Toowoomba community. It has split the community more than I have ever seen any issue split the community before. Friends are arguing about it. Colleagues are arguing about it. It has not been good for our city that those splits have emerged. The emotion in the debate on both sides, whether one is prorecycling for drinking purposes or antirecycling for drinking purposes, has been escalating dramatically as time has worn on. While the emotion of both sides of the argument is understandable, I do not think it is really adding to the quality of the debate. My position is quite clear. The opposition's position is quite clear.

We fully support the recycling of sewage. We must recycle it. The shadow minister has said many times that we have a vision that 100 per cent of water is recycled. I think that is a very good vision. That is something we should be working towards. But we do not support the recycling of sewage for drinking purposes. There is nothing inconsistent in that, despite what, for example, the member for Gympie said yesterday which is that we cannot have it both ways. We can have it both ways. It is not at all inconsistent to say that we should be recycling every drop of water but that we do not agree that it should be recycled for drinking purposes.

It seems strange to me that we are using potable water for irrigation purposes. We should be examining things like water swaps for recycled water. We should be freeing up that potable water for domestic use so that we do have fresh water supplies. Obviously that has to be done on a commercial basis. We cannot disadvantage those farmers who have a legal entitlement to that water, but it has been done in other places. For example, it might be a two for one swap or an allocation purchased. There is a whole range of different ways that it can be commercially approached.

They are the sorts of issues that we need to be looking at. Certainly we should be recycling 100 per cent of water for industrial and irrigation purposes, both agricultural and recreational, and for whatever other purposes we can. Given the options that are available to us, including for Toowoomba, we are not to the point where we should be promoting drinking recycled sewage water particularly as there remain—and it may only be a small concern that the health authorities have got—concerns regarding the long-term effect of drinking recycled sewage. There will be people and there are people in the community who say that anyone who does not accept the science that the water is purified to a level that it will not be harmful is a Luddite and simply does not get it. That is not the case. Just because someone does not agree and does have some doubt in their mind about the validity of the science—and there are conflicting views when it comes to whether or not it is safe long term—that is a valid position to take. It certainly niggles me.

As I have said in this chamber before, a friend of mine who has been in the water industry for an awfully long time and who studied science at university before going into the water industry, said to me, 'Yeah, it's probably okay, but I don't know that you can get everything out of it.' If there is any small question, then we need to be very cautious about proceeding down that path.

Yesterday in this chamber I asked the minister a question regarding the position of Morris lemma in New South Wales. The minister declined to answer, saying that the premise of the question was false. For the chamber's information, I will quote from the transcript of ABC AM on Monday, 8 May. The interview

followed an announcement on water recycling by Morris Iemma, the Premier of New South Wales. After a detailed conversation, David Mark, the interviewer, asked—

Why won't you allow recycled water to go back into the drinking water storage?

Morris Iemma said—

Well at the moment the policy is not to do that. There are a number of issues that are unresolved, and firstly community attitudes. There are still unresolved issues with the health authorities, and also unresolved issues in relation to their cost.

If there are unresolved issues with the health authorities, then we need to know what they are. If the minister believes that they are resolved, then likewise that information should—

**Mr Palaszczuk:** You believe they're resolved.

**Mr COPELAND:** No, I do not believe that they are resolved. On the information that I have been given, I have some concerns. It might only be a small concern but, if there is any concern at all with a project the magnitude of this, we need to be proceeding with caution. We should not be proceeding with the option of first resort, particularly when there are other options available to us.

The minister knows that I have raised my concerns in previous debates about the review of the options that the department of natural resources conducted for the Toowoomba City Council. I do not think it was an in-depth review; I do not think it was an exhaustive review. To be honest, I think it was more about the justification for using recycled water than it was about approaching all of those other options. I have said that on many occasions, including in this chamber. I think this is such an important issue that we need to be proceeding with caution.

As constituents have said to me, 'If water recycling is so safe, why aren't we putting recycled water back into Wivenhoe for indirect potable reuse for Brisbane?' A pipeline to go directly past Wivenhoe Dam has already been announced; it would be an easy option to do. But, no, we are not seeing that proposal; we are seeing two new dams being proposed. I agree that we should be building the dam infrastructure before we recycle that water for drinking purposes.

**Mr Palaszczuk:** Are you supporting the Mary River Dam?

**Mr COPELAND:** I am not saying that at all, Minister. What I am saying is that I support the building of infrastructure.

**Mr Palaszczuk:** You can't straddle a barbed wire fence.

**Mr COPELAND:** I am not straddling the barbed wire fence. I know who is doing that, and the member for Callide has quite accurately portrayed the opposition's position.

**Mr Seeney:** Give us the information. Give us the EIS.

**Mr COPELAND:** That is exactly right. Give us all the information, because at the moment the information is not there.

**Mr Seeney:** Where's the EIS? In four weeks!

**Mr Palaszczuk:** Don't you worry about that.

**Mr COPELAND:** We do worry about that, Minister. We do not have the EIS, we do not have the information, we do not have all of the scientific data, so we cannot just give the minister a blank cheque and say, 'Yes, we're going to support it.' It is a ludicrous proposition that we should give the minister a blank cheque and support it.

The fact is that recycled water is not being added to Wivenhoe; it is not being added to those Brisbane water storages. If it were the option of first resort, like it will be at Toowoomba, then that is the sort of thing that my constituents say should be done. If it is good enough for it to happen in Toowoomba, why is it not good enough for it to happen in Brisbane? As I said, I support the building of infrastructure to provide fresh water, and I still do and I do for Toowoomba as well. This issue will obviously continue.

The water recycling project in Toowoomba must satisfy a number of conditions to get funding from the federal government. One condition, obviously, is holding a referendum to make sure it has got the public support. Another condition is that appropriate health guidelines are drawn up by the state government because, as I understand it, those health guidelines are not in place. That is a concern, given that it looks like authorities are proceeding with it without those guidelines in place up-front. There are a number of other concerns, including security of water for existing irrigators and those sorts of things.

As I said, this proposal is splitting the Toowoomba community. I hope that we can work our way through the debate in a constructive way regardless of the outcome and that the issue does not continue to burn. I have to say that I am bitterly disappointed that we have reached the point at which we have to have this debate when there are other options on the table that in the past were not explored.

I have said before that on so many issues the government has focused on demand management as an excuse not to build infrastructure, whether it is infrastructure for electricity or for water. Demand management plays a very important role and we need to continue to work on that, but we also need to make sure that adequate supplies are in place. I agree wholeheartedly with what the minister said yesterday in that the issue is not just about water supply; it is about water recycling and demand management. For example, I would hate to see the day when we go back to having no water restrictions in

place. I cannot see the point of that. I think that everyone expects and would quite happily accept that we would continue to have restrictions on watering the garden every second day as opposed to having an open slather approach. As we live in a dry country, I think that is a completely defensible position. Even if we had a massive storm and all of our water storages were full and we had no requirement for water restriction, I think that we should still have some restrictions in place in order to have sufficient water for the future.

Water is a contentious issue and it will continue to be a contentious issue. Certainly, it is a contentious issue in my neck of the woods, both the use of water for agricultural purposes and also the proposal in Toowoomba for recycled sewage being put into the drinking water supply. There are a whole lot of differing opinions regarding that matter, such as it is done everywhere else in the world. It is not done everywhere else in the world. Singapore is really the only place that is doing it in the manner proposed by Toowoomba and that is only at a rate of two per cent of the drinking water being recycled water; whereas Toowoomba's proposal is for 25 per cent of the drinking water to be recycled water. Namibia is the other country that is cited most often as another example of a country using recycled water, but there are disputes because the equipment is not providing the quality of recycled water that it was intended to supply and that is not being added to the water supply. A range of different issues are emerging. I certainly hope that we can have a considered debate on this issue.

More importantly, I hope that those other options can be put on the table and used. In my view, we should be supplying fresh water in the first instance for drinking purposes rather than recycled sewage for drinking purposes.