



Speech by

Robert Messenger

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Hansard Tuesday, 9 October 2007

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr MESSENGER (Burnett—NPA) (9.44 pm): In speaking to the Environmental Protection Amendment Bill 2007, I would briefly like to congratulate the minister—who does not seem to be here at the moment—on his appointment to his portfolio of sustainability, climate change and innovation. I know it is a bit of a cliché but—

Mr Lawlor interjected.

Mr MESSENGER: I will say it anyway. The decisions we make in this chamber are in a lot of cases life and death decisions. I think the decision that he has made in this particular case as Minister for Sustainability, Climate Change and Innovation to allow four-wheel drives to travel along those 11 kilometres of beach on Fraser Island is a very good decision that will save lives. I am glad that those 300-odd vehicle movements on Fraser Island are not channelled up the inland road.

I would like to draw the minister's attention to proposed clause 4 of the Environmental Protection Amendment Bill and section 440B 'Meaning of litter', which states that litter includes any waste of a commercial or domestic nature. Under 'Reasons for the Bill' in the explanatory notes it states—

Litter enforcement is undertaken by authorised persons in the Environmental Protection Agency, with powers delegated to an authorised person of a local government.

I would like the minister to consider this scenario. What if it is the local government authority which is in fact the entity responsible for littering? Over a year ago, on around 26 March last year, I had cause to write to the minister, the then Hon. Desley Boyle. I said—

Minister, I wish to bring to your notice a serious matter which has recently come to my attention. Members of the public have supplied me with photos of a truck which they allege is part of an operation that daily pumps and dumps raw untreated sewage into pits which are located just off Captain Cook Drive and approximately 200 metres from the residential housing in Agnes Water just on the outskirts of the township of 1770.

The situation was confirmed in a conversation with Mayor Tom Jeffery of Miriam Vale Shire Council this morning, who stated that dumping had been carried out for a number of years and it appeared that no approval or licence had been given by the EPA for the council or other companies to carry out this dumping. According to concerned community members, the dumping of this raw sewage could have been going on for more than a decade. I expressed to the minister in my letter that I was very concerned about this activity. I received an email from the EPA, as it was at the time, which addressed my concerns. It said—

I can advise that the EPA has investigated the issues raised in your letter. The site in question is the Agnes Water landfill that has been operated by the Miriam Vale Shire Council for many years and includes a pit for the disposal of sewage, sludge, effluent under its development approval. Population growth has seen development encroach this site, and the EPA has been in negotiations with the Miriam Vale Shire Council on alternatives. A site inspection was carried out on 4 April and is expected to finalise an alternative to this current practice in the near future.

I am very concerned about this practice—that is, the dumping of raw sewage into these sullage pits—that had been going on in my electorate for many years—in fact, decades—with the approval, it

seems, of the state government and with the cooperation of the local government. If you take the literal meaning of 'litter' in this legislation, litter includes any waste of a commercial or domestic nature.

What actually happened at Agnes Water was that a sewage truck—a little tanker—used to go down to the marina, pump the sewage out and then travel down the road five kilometres or less and then dump this raw sewage into a sullage pit. Of course, this raises serious issues regarding public health and also serious issues regarding the environment. I would love the minister to answer my question: is this practice occurring in other areas in the state? I am led to believe that sewage sullage pits were quite common throughout the state before the advent of proper sewerage. I would really like an answer as to the extent of this problem. How many sewage sullage pits, for example, are there in the state? Does the EPA know that? Are they mapped out? Have they been audited? I think it is important to help local government to dispose of sewage in an appropriate manner—certainly in relation to the Town of 1770 and Miriam Vale Shire Council. It has a very basic sewerage system and it needs a lot of help to improve that. There are three dams and the sewage is pumped into these dams untreated. There is a settlement pond and the overflow is pumped out into the forest. I think it is heading towards the stage where we need to consider the zero ocean outfall option and we need to recycle that sewage and use it for irrigation at least for agricultural purposes.

I know from the backyard of the minister for sustainability and climate change—Hervey Bay—that the council there is very proactive in the way that it disposes of its effluent. I welcome the new minister to the portfolio and congratulate him on his decision to allow the four-wheel-drive traffic to travel along that beach at 40 kilometres per hour. I think it is a common-sense decision and I believe it is a decision that has immediately saved lives.

I would like the minister to have a look at the issue of sewage sullage pits. I was relaying to the chamber that there is a sewage sullage pit at Agnes Water/1770. It was, in fact, the local government authority that was part of the littering process. The question is: what if it is the local government authority who is, in fact, the entity responsible for the littering? Once again, I would like to find out if those sewage sullage pits are still being used within the state of Queensland. I think it is an antiquated process and we really need to have a long, hard, close look at this.

When I went there I could not believe it when I saw it. There was a council worker who was in a little outhouse, for want of a better word, near a dump. He said to me that whenever he got mosquito bites they would take a couple of months to heal. That is one of the public health concerns I have. There are children around there and there is quite a lot of residential development. It was a quite a shock to see this happening in the 21st century. With those few words, I commend the bill to the House.