



Speech by

Fiona Simpson

MEMBER FOR MAROOCHYDORE

Hansard Thursday, 15 May 2008

WATER SUPPLY (SAFETY AND RELIABILITY) BILL

Miss SIMPSON (Maroochydore—NPA) (Deputy Leader of the Opposition) (12.11 pm): In supporting the contribution of my colleague the member for Darling Downs, I reiterate our concerns that such a significant piece of legislation, which covers a multitude of issues concerning water supplies in the state, is being brought before the parliament with a lack of consultation with some of the major stakeholders who have an understanding of these complex issues. We have touched base with a range of stakeholders who do understand that this legislation needs to be correct and implemented in a way which takes into consideration all of their concerns.

The legislation is complex, as we have mentioned, but it is quite surprising—I have never seen legislation like it in this parliament—that there are clauses mentioned in the explanatory notes that are blank basically because the government has not worked them out yet. There are actually empty clauses so that the government can go back and add additional clauses later and still ensure consecutive numbering. I have never seen blank pieces in legislation anticipating significant amendments to be made to a bill. I do not think that is a surprise when one considers the lack of real consultation with key stakeholders—in fact, people were only given a couple of days to respond to the issues in the legislation. Perhaps the state government is anticipating amendments to the legislation and that is why there are these blank bits in it. It is anticipating that it will find problems that it will have to come back and fix up later.

This legislation also for the first time addresses a framework to bring in standards with regard to adding recycled water to our drinking water supplies. It does cover a range of other statewide water issues as well. Specific guidelines and parameters that will indicate how it will operate are not included in this legislation. In fact, there is little detail as to what these guidelines will involve. We have some concerns that for such a significant issue there is a lack of indication in the legislation as to how such drinking standards should be applied. There is also some concern that the guidelines that will be implemented could be ones that are of the state government's own choosing rather than ones that are in keeping with the wider industry standards which have been emerging. I will come back to these guideline issues in a moment and seek to table some of the existing reports on this matter.

Let me address the issue of recycled water—also called treated effluent or purified recycled water. It has been a contentious issue. It is coalition policy to support the use of recycled water for industry, agriculture, power generation and only as a last resort in drinking water supplies. The coalition believes that this fit-for-purpose approach to recycled water usage is a responsible approach based upon good economic sense and in line with public expectations of good governance as well as supporting the security of water supply.

In circumstances where recycled water is added to water supplies, our amendments propose that it should be strictly monitored and the results published. As mentioned before, there is very little indication as to how the guidelines surrounding these drinking standards will be monitored and how they will be published. We believe this should sit within legislation. In contrast, it has been the policy of the Labor government to tell people that they have no other choice but to drink recycled water. With the exception of

this water minister's second reading speech, where he implied it would be added only as a last resort, there is no such caveat in this legislation.

Given the information in the Western Corridor Recycled Water Project business case from May 2007, which I table, I would beg to differ that there were not other choices for drinking water supplies which were cost competitive, safe and able to be constructed in a timely way. I table that document.

Tabled paper: Report, dated 15 May 2007, by the Department of Infrastructure, titled 'Western Corridor Recycled Water Project: Business Case'.

Furthermore, the government has given no clear indication as to what the monitoring program will be for this program of adding recycled water to drinking water supplies or the public reporting required. We believe that this is a very important issue. One of our amendments seeks to apply the Queensland Water Recycling Guidelines to the need for ongoing monitoring for environmental and public health purposes. In fact, that particular amendment comes directly from those guidelines. We felt that it was important enough to put it into the body of the legislation. I table those guidelines.

Tabled paper: Report, dated December 2005, by the Environmental Protection Agency, titled 'Queensland Water Recycling Guidelines'.

We have expressed concerns about the lack of the accountability in this process. We have supported the construction of the western corridor recycled pipeline as a project which originally was conceived to supply water for industry, agriculture and power generation. We have expressed concerns about the poor handling of contracts and the scope of this project which has led to a massive blowout in cost of \$700 million from an original cost estimate of \$1.7 billion. It is now a \$2.4 billion project. When south-east Queenslanders pay water price hikes up to 400 per cent over the next 10 years, they can thank this government for its poor management of its water infrastructure and failing to build the right infrastructure at the right time and to manage it in the right way.

The cost blowout for this particular recycled water pipeline has been sold to Queenslanders under false pretences by the government. This Labor government said these pipes would deliver up to 230 megalitres a day and has continued to quote the ultimate capacity of the pipeline and to downplay that in its own reports under drought conditions this recycled pipeline will only yield 131 megalitres a day—that is, 131 megalitres a day for a \$2.4 billion project which is being sold as a drought-proofing measure to save householders who have been doing their bit to save water. How truthful is it of the government to say that it will be saving householders and ensure water security? Let us look at the figures.

I ask members in this parliament: how much water do they think our power stations use? I will give them the answer because it is quite enlightening. According to the SEQRWSS report, 110 megalitres a day is normally used in south-east Queensland by power generators. I table that report.

Tabled paper: Extract from SEQRWSS Stage 2 Interim Report, page 6, headed 'Water planning and management in SEQ'.

As we know, due to the circumstances of drought in recent times, power generators had to be wound back at great expense—tens of millions of dollars—to Queensland Treasury coffers. However, based on these figures, more than 84 per cent of a drought yield from a recycled water pipeline could be utilised by power generators alone, power generators who do not require water to be treated to the same standard as drinking water supplies. So, as I said, I know there is contention about the relative merits of putting recycled water into the water system for drinking, but I put to this parliament, looking at just the economics of the issue, is it not strange how quiet this government has been about the fact that 110 megalitres alone is used by our power generators to run those generators and that 84 per cent of a drought yield from a recycled pipeline, which the government says is necessary to provide water for drinking, could be used for power generation and does not need to be treated to the same standard as drinking water?

So there is a big question mark about what the government has said about how wisely it has acted and the timeliness of bringing on this project. As I said, we support this project for industry, agriculture and power generation but question the way this government handles money and handles the truth. This brings me again to the issue of standards and how the government is going to handle the sensitive issue of adding recycled water to water supplies and telling people to trust it, that it is going to do the job of applying appropriate monitoring and appropriate public reporting. Given its misleading information in regard to the economics of some of these projects, I put it to this House that it is vitally important that the legislation contains some safeguards to ensure that that monitoring is in fact undertaken. That is what we seek to do with these amendments.

I would also like to talk about the standards because this legislation does not in fact seek to apply the *Australian guidelines for water recycling: augmentation of drinking water supplies*, dated May 2008, by the Environmental Protection and Heritage Council, National Health and Medical Research Council and the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council. I table those guidelines.

Tabled paper: Report, dated May 2008, by the Environment Protection and Heritage Council, the National Health and Medical Research Council and Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council, titled 'Australian Guidelines for Water Recycling: Augmentation of Drinking Water Supplies'.

Also, the legislation does not appear to seek to apply the Queensland guidelines as mentioned before. In fact, the legislation refers to an overseas company being involved in the certification process in relation to the application of the guidelines and the standards as they are implemented throughout the system. I ask the minister to please explain why it is using an international company in regard to this particular process and what the reasoning behind this particular process is. The Drinking Water Quality Management System Auditor Certification Scheme is going to be developed by RABQSA International Inc. ARBN 112238169. Why has the government chosen this overseas company instead of adopting the hazard analysis and critical control points—HACCP—which is recommended by the Australian Water Association and the Australian guidelines for recycled water? I would certainly welcome the minister's explanation in that regard.

Queenslanders deserve to know that their water supplies are safe. They deserve to know that, regardless of the government of the day, an independent process will give surety that they are drinking safe water. They deserve to know that it is not the spin of government that tells them whether or not their water is safe but that there is an independent process that has no regard for a political process but has the highest regard for public health which will ensure that there is oversight of these supplies.

As I have outlined, I have grave concerns about the government's ability to do that in the light of the issues that I have raised. I also have grave concerns about the fact that there was not proper, full and open consultation with a range of stakeholders rather than the token approach that we have seen to date. I urge the government to adopt the amendments that we are putting on the table that say that, where there are circumstances where recycled water will be added, we need to have appropriate monitoring and accountability measures in place and enshrine some of those strict parameters in legislation to guide the regulations when they are tabled later on. I endorse the comments of my colleagues, and I urge the support of this House for the amendments which we will put forward.