



Speech by

Dr Alex Douglas

MEMBER FOR GAVEN

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WATER AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Dr DOUGLAS (Gaven—LNP) (5.10 pm): We are seeing more and more legislation around water under Labor that has no other role apart from control, increasing the difficulty of access and increasing the cost. Water is life. It is from the Latin word 'vitas' or life. Labor has targeted water need in large storage facilities and its bulk transfer. This is to enable it to draw huge amounts of recurrent income with very little administrative costs. This is a disgrace and it is very hypocritical from a group who rigorously opposed dam construction, describing it as old technology. Wolffdene's cancellation was one of many failures, and it demonstrates Labor's lack of principle when faced with issues of politics over community need. Similarly, Labor's current inability to confront it by writing off \$12 billion in a wasted water grid strategy paralysed its own balance sheet.

Brisbane nearly ran out of water because the Queensland Labor Party failed the public. Wayne Goss, Kevin Rudd, Peter Beattie and many current members here cancelled the key plank of safety of the water reserve—that is, water security. Brisbane was not saved by a faulty desal plant, a western corridor bypass pipeline nor a pipeline from the Hinze Dam; it was saved by rain, the random effects of calculated probability and the major flood mitigation dam at Wivenhoe.

The Traveston Dam proposal was always a nonsense and its consumption of nearly \$600 million was an obscenity that requires a formal apology to our state's residents by the Premier and her members. There was absolutely no need to move ahead on land resumptions and road expenditure ahead of federal government approval. It was wrong then and it remains unresolved. Vital first-class agricultural land is lying fallow and underutilised in the very fertile Mary Valley.

This is an omnibus bill. It is very busy and its justification seems to be more than just a bit token—I would say it is dubious in parts. I say that in light of the minister's statement in his second reading speech that—

This is necessary in light of the somewhat dishonest and tricky campaigns that have been launched by some councils in South-East Queensland ...

The south-east councils—which have had their water assets effectively taken from them, mismanaged, top-loaded with debt, with a massive increase in bulk water single invoice charges, and then had them handed back to the state structured water distribution entities—have with very good reasons stated the truth of the matter. They have been accused of price gouging, and the councils have defended their rather miserable five per cent return—as opposed to the state receiving a 1,000 per cent return on costs before the addition of their excessive capital costs. That is right. The state, under Labor, believes it is 200 times more deserving of public water costs.

By 2015, the Water Commission expects to charge \$2.75 per kilolitre, which is \$1.30 more than Victoria, \$1.05 more than New South Wales and \$1.35 more than Western Australia. Only Victoria does not have a functioning 100-meg-plus desalination plant. That is what this bill is about. The minister has stated that the end customers of the water will receive information about the distributor governance, the metered charges, including end charges, and what really makes up their bill and they will have a dispute

resolution process. That basically flies in the face and is contrary to what was really contained within the minister's speech.

These are the facts. Fact No. 1 is that three-quarters of the average water charge to the individual is charged by the Queensland Water Commission—that is, the government. Fact No. 2 is that the state does not provide water infrastructure and councils charge ratepayers in either quarterly or biannual fixed charges to pay for that service. This is not new and is accepted by all. Fact No. 3 is that the state does not provide sewerage. Largely it never has in South-East Queensland. Councils do that. Household ratepayers pay a fixed charge based on pedestals and type of use. These charges are largely unchanged. Fact No. 4 is that the state under Labor is attempting to claw back \$12 billion of wasted capital. The money is lost and it is completely immoral to try to hijack the ratepayers' purse.

I have previously tabled in parliament the bulk water charges. They are not disagreed. These are the charges to Allconnex and they are the same to Unitywater and Queensland Urban Utilities. These are the three major South-East Queensland water distributors. In simple terms, on any rate notice the vast bulk of the increase in water cost is due to the current Labor government. Stop blaming councils. Stop blaming anyone at all. Blaming is the weak response of those who cannot handle the truth and seek to mislead those who might not question it.

Councils are good partners for the state. Local government is the key to good community governance and practical solutions to local problems. The minister repeatedly states that he wants transparency. Then let it be so. Do not confuse issues here. The councils are ready to do their jobs. They are the key water distributors and they just want to get on with the job. The cost of the bulk water charge at \$2.75 is probably \$1.25 per kilo—that is 33 per cent to pump the water, meter it, read and report the meter, send out the bills to millions of ratepayers, collect the money and pay the bulk water supplier who sends out just one bill to each entity.

Let us be really sensible here. The consumers should be fairly dealt with, and the councils have proved their efficiency over time. On the Gold Coast and the Sunshine Coast, it was the councils that built the bulk water supplies, built the treatment plants and built all of the distribution systems in the ground. As well, the Gold Coast City Council has moved to certification 6—that is the old tertiary level treated system—and has installed the Pimpama waste water treatment system. Any ocean outfall is of drinkable quality.

The Tugun desalination system was originally a 30-meg unit proposed by the council and was approved by a vote of support from Gold Coast residents at the elections as emergency backup. Labor wanted a 120-meg unit and that is what was finally installed. Labor members have subsequently announced in some parts that they wanted to move to 180-meg. They actually wanted the Hinze Dam also at 16 metres so the dam height did go to 16 metres. It was originally proposed to be 10.8 metres, according to the most logical engineering principles. That is why the dam will cost \$300 million instead of \$82 million.

For some crazy reason, they subsequently built the pipeline to Brisbane that went through to the uncompleted dam, in spite of the desalination unit's early completion—and it was significantly early. Effectively, it was then loaded into the southern end system where it was not wanted nor needed. Brisbane's water pipelines—other than the link to Toowoomba, and we have heard from the member for Toowoomba North today—we largely useless and deliver the types of water to the power stations that the turbines do not like and the engineers who run the power stations do not want.

The last part of the bill is really rather curious in terms of the amendments to the Queensland Competition Authority. The power stations were not allowed to have anything other than what the government dictated because no-one else would accept the treated effluent coming in the pipeline. The true competitive environment was defeated by the government overriding the GOC's freedom of choice. So how can true competition really be defined, and why does the government not practise what it preaches?

The other major amendment within the bill is the groundwater management charges which will have broad effects on farmers, towns, miners, including gas companies, and everyday home occupiers. Tragically, the new regulatory body is the Queensland Water Commission again. It does appear that much of the new additional roles will be funded by a levy on the petroleum industry. In other words, the individual users will not necessarily be charged.

There are a number of significantly detailed regulatory steps being asked to be assented to. The minister aspires that these will strengthen and provide existing landholders new water supply bores and they will also protect natural springs from underground water extraction impacts by petroleum tenure holders.

The further amendments in the Water Supply (Safety and Reliability) Act 2008 provide a regulatory framework to regulate CSG impacting on drinking water supplies and drinking water service providers—that is the CSG recycled water—and they will protect the public's health. That is an admirable ambition.

Two key areas are directly affected. These are the Condamine Alluvium and the Great Artesian Basin. These were widely discussed by the member for Callide and the member for Warrego. The Condamine is at two metres and the Great Artesian Basin is at five metres. The minister stated in his second reading speech that the petroleum companies will make good on quantity and quality impacts on their extraction actions. He has stated that there will be monitoring, data collection and three-yearly public consultation. The minister has stated that the CSG recycled water providers will be required to prove that treatment processes and supporting management arrangements will consistently deliver water of quality.

There is a significant compliance component to that, too. There is a significant collection issue of significance. One area in Queensland where this is so is Nebo. This may be the one that provides us with a quick learning curve. The correct management of water is a major public health issue for reasons of drinking, washing, cleaning, sanitation, industrial farming, recreation and social purposes. One needs to do it well. Food comes a close second.

The points made by the members for Callide and Warrego are critical. The statement by mayors is that landholders have great concerns about their individual water supplies. These concerns are very reasonable. The regions are not wanting to block reasonable access to gas under their quality land. What they want is the CSG companies to primarily engage in best practice. But they also want the thing that we all take for granted. They want safe drinking water, adequate water and a lack of contamination of their water used for other purposes, including agricultural purposes.

In our haste to sign contracts and gain royalty income we here in parliament must be fair to all Queenslanders. It is absolutely imperative that we take into account that we eat food from these areas, especially more so now that the Mary River Valley was nearly destroyed by the failed Traveston Dam. In agricultural terms it has never recovered and it may never recover with functioning efficient farms. The Downs and Condamine regions are very critical as food bowls for our major urban South-East Queensland population.

There is too much in this bill saying that the department will do all things in the future. There has to be the here and now. This is essential for certainty, security and fairness. With 4,000 wells already in the ground we must be saying what we are doing right now. At Nebo near Mackay what occurred when water got short was that the mining groups excessively used groundwater supplies, wells dried up, farms became difficult to manage and livelihoods were challenged and good arable land became borderline land. When challenged, miners bought land, chased credits of sorts and destocked. They basically diverted water and tried to keep their mines viable in very hard times.

As one might expect, people have to do what they can within the law and they will do so. That will probably be what will happen in most of the areas where there are 4,000 CSG wells. We will have to ensure that the people who live in the area are protected. I do not think this bill does this, despite the minister's reassurances. I endorse the comments of my fellow LNP colleagues on this matter.

The wild rivers legislative changes to the Lake Eyre Basin—and I have heard all sorts of positive statements from government members—are consistent with the Bligh Labor government's current Greens preferences trade-off over substantive policy. Effectively, the rights of those seriously affected by not just fuzzy-logic policy as wild rivers might be seen, with green goggles, are those owners' rights and they are being trampled upon. When viewed in the clear light of day and with careful scrutiny, this policy is destructive and is completely against national sovereign interest.

No wonder this type of legislation has attracted federal political attention. Even though it is dressed up as environmental protection, all this policy will do is exacerbate the need for exerting federal control and make communities along those river catchments difficult to sustain. It is indeed a planning instrument. The future of those along those rivers is seriously in doubt.

There are job losses ahead. The reason for that is that this is being delivered as saving our environmental heritage. But no stakeholder consultation was engaged in. It was a Greens trade-off for political control. It is significant proof of what little both Independents and minority parties do for communities whom they can punish with few consequences. It is a new definition of political collateral damage.

This bill also strongly amends the QIMR Act 1945 to allow QIMR to operate more effectively. The QIMR trust is abolished and a single statutory body is formed. It should be more effective and it is welcome. QIMR is a tremendous state asset. It has benefited us exceedingly.

Ms Grace: It is in my electorate.

Dr DOUGLAS: I take the interjection from the member for Brisbane Central. It is in the electorate of Brisbane Central. Most people may be unaware that QIMR exists in many places and has done so over the history of Queensland. Currently, the former director, Michael Good, has moved to Griffith University on the Gold Coast. He is running the antistrep program which should significantly help with rheumatic heart

disease, which is a significant illness affecting Indigenous Australians. In particular, it severely affects Torres Strait Islanders. It does have a significant effect on northern Aboriginals.

Never in Queensland's history has there been such a difference between two political parties as there is on the issue of water. Honourable members, does that not ring alarm bells for anyone? The public not only resents being held to ransom and forced to ration something like water; there is also no good reason to end up as we all are now in South-East Queensland.

This is a South-East Queensland problem that has been effectively engineered by Labor's neglect in pursuit of short-term political gain. In short, the LNP policy is that which we have always held. Dams will still need to be built but with a heavy flood mitigation impact. Councils will treat, distribute and sell water to the public as they always have done. The Commonwealth will fund dams as before and be repaid their costs by their retrieval from consumers and from business.

The state has very little real role in this. The Labor position is about creating a problem to engineer control and earn money for state revenue. Honourable members, the debt incurred by the Labor Party is its own revenue problem. It has no right to charge councils or its entities both a capital charge and a compounding interest component. The claims currently made by the government are outrageously false claims and they should not be continuing. This bill is a difficult bill. It certainly is one that the LNP is not supporting and there are very good reasons for it.