




Speech by

Jarrold Bleijie

MEMBER FOR KAWANA

Hansard Wednesday, 15 June 2011

FAIRER WATER PRICES FOR SEQ AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr BLEIJIE** (Kawana—LNP) (4.17 pm): This afternoon I rise to contribute to debate on the Fairer Water Prices for SEQ Amendment Bill 2011 introduced by the government. For ease of reference when discussing this bill and the broader issue of water reform, I will refer essentially to a Bligh government backflip on its own recent water reforms, highlighting the fact that this long-term Labor government is out of touch with the community and out of ideas. In fact, as we have heard in this chamber today, it is totally bereft of ideas. I was most amused to hear the member for Morayfield's contribution to this debate when he said that the Labor government is a future-thinking government. The member for Morayfield's comrades were nodding in total agreement. I say this to the member for Morayfield: there is nothing future thinking about a government policy that some 12 months ago was in total contrast to what we are debating today. That is not future thinking, because if the government was thinking about this bill today then it would not have introduced the legislation it brought in 12 months ago, because this legislation today is in total contradiction to the bills we debated then. There is nothing futuristic about the Labor Party in Queensland. There is nothing futuristic about this government. It is stuck in the past—stuck in the past without any new ideas!

Ms Croft interjected.

Mr BLEIJIE: I take the member for Broadwater's interjection asking what our policies are. To ease the member for Broadwater's anticipation and enthusiasm for my contribution today, I will let her know that I intend to set out our four-point plan.

I am more than pleased to be able to explain to the member for Broadwater, and in particular the constituents of the electorate of Broadwater, exactly what our policy is because, in actual fact, some of this government's policy is a direct copy of the LNP's position. So let us talk about policy. Let us have this policy debate, but let us be fair dinkum about Campbell Newman's four-point plan, which forced this government into presenting this bill. It is nothing more than that. It was not any futuristic plan that this Labor Party had; it was Campbell Newman getting great media coverage for an issue in Queensland. The government, as is always the case—the reactionary state government it is—had to introduce this legislation, because Campbell was getting the great coverage. Do members know why? Campbell Newman listens to the people, and the people in our electorates in South-East Queensland are saying that they can least afford water prices and that they can least afford increases in water prices. That is what the people of Queensland—

Ms Boyle interjected.

Mr BLEIJIE: That is what the people in Cairns are saying to their local member. They are saying, 'We cannot cope with the increases in electricity prices and water prices.' That is what they have told Campbell Newman.

Campbell Newman then put out a four-point plan. The government may attack that plan—it may do this and that—but the reality is that Campbell Newman forced the Labor Party into a policy position and

into realising that its total legislation at the start was wrong, that it should never have happened in the first place.

We talk about ending the blame game. All I have heard in the contributions today from the members opposite is blaming councils. It is a total contradiction for members of the Labor Party to on the one hand say, 'We are ending the blame game but, by the way, it is all councils' fault,' because that is blaming someone. That is blaming the councils. That is typical of the Labor Party in Queensland—hypocrisy at its highest.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr O'Brien): Order! Your language is not parliamentary. I ask you to withdraw.

Mr BLEIJIE: I withdraw. I congratulate the LNP election leader, Campbell Newman. It was his leadership that led to yet another government backflip and its recognition of the failure of its own water policies that stood for nothing more than waste, inefficiency and driving up the cost of water for all residents in South-East Queensland. The Bligh government's backflip came into effect just weeks after Campbell Newman announced the LNP's four-point plan to address the skyrocketing cost of water for South-East Queenslanders. If backflipping were an Olympic sport, the Labor Party would win gold every single day. If backflipping were a sport in the Commonwealth Games, the Labor Party would win gold each and every time, because—

A government member: You just said that.

Mr BLEIJIE: No, I did not. I said that if backflipping were an Olympic sport the Labor Party would win gold. If it were a Commonwealth Games sport, the Labor Party would win the Commonwealth gold medal in backflipping as well.

For the record, as other members on this side of the House will today, I will outline the historical context of what has taken place. Earlier this year Campbell Newman announced a four-point plan for water reform for residents in South-East Queensland. That plan was as follows: the amalgamation of the five bulk water entities into one to provide greater efficiencies; handing back control of the water-retailing bodies to councils; writing off the non-performing water grid assets; and, finally, immediately adopting a 40-year price path to repay the state government's \$7 billion water grid.

We on this side of the House know that what Labor stands for is waste and higher taxes. That impacts on the people of Queensland. Cost-of-living pressures in key areas such as water and electricity are a contrast to the promises of Labor Party Premiers over the past four years. The promises from this long-term Labor government on one issue in particular related to the electricity reform that we had. I remind members that in 2007 it was the Premier at the time, Peter Beattie, who promised that no-one would be worse off when he announced that the electricity market would be deregulated. Four years later, the average electricity bill for Queensland families has continued to rise. Water prices also demonstrate absolute disregard for people who can least afford them in Queensland. We have seen this situation before with the asset sales, with car registration, with fuel taxes and with electricity prices, as I have just mentioned, and we see the situation with water prices today.

The legislation before the House has been introduced to undo the government's own water reform agenda. The government is repealing its own legislation because it was so poorly conceived in the first instance. When we debate this legislation, it is important to include the historical context of the issues at hand.

I turn to the debate of the South-East Queensland Water (Distribution and Retail Restructuring) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2010. We do not have to delve too far back in our history books, because that bill was debated in only April 2010. *Hansard* of the minister's second reading speech makes for some interesting reading. It states—

This is the latest step in the Bligh government's delivery of better water services in South-East Queensland.

That step lasted for just over a year. During the same speech the minister also said—

As a result of these reforms, better customer service can be expected over the coming years.

The minister left out of his speech one of the most important facts, and that was the exorbitant cost of these services. In my contribution to the debate on that bill in 2010 I stated—

Prior to amalgamation, the 10 local governments in South-East Queensland operated their own entities to distribute water and waste water. Like all dictatorships, the Bligh government initially intended a full state government takeover of those entities as part of its water and wastewater reforms.

Last year, when what we thought was the final bill in terms of the government's water reforms was debated, the LNP predicted that these reforms would impose an additional burden by adding to the cost-of-living pressures and expenses of residents in South-East Queensland. At that time in my contribution to the debate I said—

What the minister did not mention was the increase in costs ... of the state government's takeover and continual backflips.

That was said a year ago. On 19 May 2010, the Leader of the Opposition, the member for Callide, said in his contribution to the second reading debate of that bill—

Like the rest of Queensland, they knew that the government had bungled the water reform process from the start. It had bungled the process to such an extent that consumers in South-East Queensland will pay exceptionally high water costs for years to come.

So if we go back to the prediction of the member for Morayfield of futuristic governments, the future was predicted by the LNP a year ago. We predicted higher costs of living. We predicted higher costs for water based on this government's reform agenda. What have we seen? As a member of parliament representing an area in South-East Queensland, I continually get people coming into my office saying that they just cannot afford the price of water and I cannot explain for that purpose why they are paying so much for water and what help and assistance is available because they cannot afford it. What else would we expect from a tired, stale long-term Labor government than another policy change—another thought bubble and another backflip? That is exactly what this bill is.

I heard the Premier in this place say that they are going to end the blame game with the mayors and councils across South-East Queensland. Yet in the minister's second reading speech on the current bill before the House he has again put all the blame for skyrocketing increases in water prices in South-East Queensland back on the councils. Talk about ending the blame game! In his second reading speech the minister said that this is being introduced as a response to the community which has been calling for the government to take action against the high water and wastewater prices being charged by councils and the council owned distributor-retailers. Well, yes, it was—it was community feedback led by the LNP opposition in Queensland and by Campbell Newman. That is the reality of the situation. To quote from the minister's speech at the time, he said—

This bill is also a direct response to South-East Queensland councils' continuing inaction.

I am sorry? Was this the minister again trying to end the blame game on this issue? It sounded more like he was perpetuating the issue and the blame on the councils in South-East Queensland in a desperate attempt to rid the Bligh government of the responsibility for the increase in water costs for residents in South-East Queensland. Queenslanders are smart enough, tough enough and big enough to know what is going on here. They know what happens when no minister takes responsibility for health payroll bungles. They know what happens when no minister takes responsibility for bungled water reform processes. Queenslanders are smart enough to understand what is going on here. One word lies at the heart of this Labor government in Queensland— incompetence. There has been absolute incompetence from a minister and absolute incompetence from a cabinet. I think Queenslanders understand that. I think the government is starting to understand that or we would not be debating this bill. If the government thought it had won this issue then this bill would not be introduced today.

I think it is important to also put this bill in the context of the great water swindle and reform agenda of this government. Before we clarify the historical context of the current bill I want to address some of the comments in the minister's second reading speech. In his speech the minister obviously left out the part that it was his government and his legislation that legislated water retail distribution entities in Queensland. It was not the councils; it was the Queensland Labor Party's legislation that set up those entities. In fact, it was legislation that I referred to earlier on in this debate today, debated in this parliament just over 12 months ago. He left out the part that it was his government and his legislation that ensured that councils had no control.

Now, I heard members say that Unitywater is 50 per cent owned by the Moreton Bay Regional Council and 50 per cent owned by the Sunshine Coast Regional Council. Usually when one owns something one has some level of control over it from an ownership perspective. That is not the case with Unitywater. There is no control over the pricing structure for water by the water entities Allconnex, Queensland Urban Utilities and Unitywater. They have to set their retail pricing schedule in accordance with Queensland competition policy.

Last year we had a water forum on the Sunshine Coast. At that forum we had 450 members of the public turn up screaming about their water bills. The first message I gave those people was to take the water bill they brought that night to the next election. I have said it in this place before: the only way we can address these serious issues of cost-of-living pressures is to change the minister and to change the government. I did the right thing and invited the minister to attend the forum. It was not a secret forum. I said that in his absence if he would like to send a representative please feel free and they can address the crowd. Of course, no government representative appeared. The council was represented, Unitywater was represented, I was the host as local MP, but there was no government representative. In fact, the government was represented by an empty chair in that place.

The minister left out that this whole reform agenda was an agenda of the Labor government, not the councils. The councils did not pick up the phone one day and say, 'We have got this great idea for you to

take over all the bulk water assets and set up all these retail entities which will charge exorbitant fees and bulk water charges for constituents into the future.' The councils did not do it. The Labor government in Queensland did it. It is an absolute shame that things like that happen with this government over and over again. It is so reactionary. Most bills in this place either correct errors of judgement of government or correct errors in government policy. We see that again today where we are debating a bill which changes the goalposts in terms of the components of the water reform process that the government introduced over 12 months ago.

I note with interest in a right-to-information request of the Sunshine Coast Regional Council, which I will table for the benefit of members, a letter from the Premier dated 2 January 2008.

Tabled paper: Copy of a letter, dated 2 January 2008, from the Premier of Queensland, Hon. Anna Bligh MP, to the Chair, Council of Mayors South East Queensland, Councillor Campbell Newman, regarding reform of the urban water supply industry [\[4682\]](#).

The Premier said in that letter to Councillor Campbell Newman, chair of the Council of Mayors of South-East Queensland—

The Government has no intention to revisit the structural form of the water industry that I announced on 4 September 2008 which provided for—

and there are many points but I will list the last two—

between three and ten retailers, which will be structurally separate from Councils by no later than 1 June 2010; and

a distribution entity which provides distribution services to retailers through local pipe networks and potable storage reservoirs, which will be structurally separate from Councils by no later than 1 July 2010.

This was the water reform process that was to end all water reform processes in Queensland. If it had not been for the LNP, the community's outrage about their bills and members of the Labor Party in this House looking at their local polling and recognising that water and the increase in cost-of-living pressures is a big issue in South-East Queensland, then this bill would not be debated today.

The people who should be congratulated for any change in the entities is Campbell Newman and the LNP because there we will start addressing the issue of cost-of-living pressures. The government has named this bill the Fairer Water Prices for SEQ Amendment Bill. There is nothing fair about this water reform process. I say to members of the public in Queensland: if we are going to be fair dinkum about getting change in Queensland then the only way we can do it is with a can-do attitude, a can-do policy initiative—as I have indicated, four processes—and vote this terrible incompetent government out.