




Speech by

Hon. Lawrence Springborg

MEMBER FOR SOUTHERN DOWNS

Hansard Thursday, 29 November 2012

SOUTH EAST QUEENSLAND WATER (RESTRUCTURING) AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Hon. LJ SPRINGBORG** (Southern Downs—LNP) (Minister for Health) (3.37 pm): I rise to make a short contribution to the debate on the bill before the House. In particular, I rise to make a contribution about the provisions that relate to water fluoridation and the amendments which are to be moved in the consideration in detail stage by the sponsoring minister, the honourable member for Caloundra.

There is little doubt that nothing stirs up sentiment and emotion in the community as much as debate and discussion around the benefits or otherwise of the fluoridation of the water supply. As the Minister for Health, I want to make the point at the outset that I am convinced that the evidence in favour of fluoridation of the water supply to the levels we do in Queensland provides absolutely no disadvantage to people's oral health but only provides significant benefits to their oral health. I think there is no doubt that the evidence is there.

I think it is also important to point out that there is no credible quantitative evidence that indicates that there is any substantial harm to people from fluoridation at the level we fluoridate water supplies in Queensland. We have very strict criteria around that. In areas where there is significant occurring natural fluoride those communities are exempted from fluoridating their water supply. The level of fluoridation of Queensland water supplies is such that it will do no harm to individuals and can only provide benefit to individuals.

Notwithstanding that, I think it is also very important to understand that there is a significant degree of emotional connection and concern about this issue in the community. That is why when there was a discussion, when there was a debate about a move towards mandatory fluoridation in Queensland some four years ago, there was much concern in the community from people about the issue of freedom of choice, and not only that but respect for local government when it came to the issue of being able to decide what should happen in their communities.

Indeed, we have about 87 per cent of the Queensland population currently covered by fluoridated water supplies. There is potential for another few per cent to fluoridate. But, under the amendments which are going to be moved later in consideration in detail by the sponsoring minister, there will also be an opportunity for those communities and those local governments which are currently fluoridating to consider what is in the best interests of their community and move to opt out of fluoridation in the future.

Even the previous Labor government in Queensland realised that there was some significant community concern and great desire to be involved in the issue of choice with regard to fluoridation. That is why they proposed in about 2007 to have a number of community polls or referendums. One of those was to be in Warwick in my electorate where there was some discussion about that. They were preparing for an advisory poll. I think the previous government did recognise that there was an underlying desire within the community for them to be consulted with regard to fluoridation. But the previous Labor government, after

promising those advisory polls, came along and took away that particular right and they moved towards a mandatory basis for fluoridation in Queensland.

As I indicated, there is little doubt that fluoridation of the water supply can actually provide some benefit with regard to oral health. It is also true, if you look at some of the significant evidence emerging throughout the world, that even countries in Europe are now moving to remove fluoride from their water supply, not because of any evidence that it is going to be harmful to people—because there is no evidence of that—but based on freedom of choice. There has also been significant evidence that, in those countries where there has been a move towards fluoridation of water supplies and in those countries where there has not been a move towards fluoridation of water supplies, there is almost the same proportional increase in improvements in oral health. A lot of that has been based on the fact that many people are now more aware of oral health and a lot more has been done with regard to public awareness and education. Notwithstanding that, I think it is fair to say that there is still a small gap, but that gap is nowhere near as wide as it was previously.

Indeed, I heard the honourable member for Mulgrave speaking a moment ago. He may not have been here at the time but I think in 2005 the member for Surfers Paradise proposed a private member's bill in this place to move towards a form of mandatory fluoridation and the Labor Party at the time opposed it on the basis that it was repugnant in that local government was not being consulted. So what we are seeing is some degree of contradiction in their position.

If the argument is that the level of fluoridation in our water supplies is harmful, I do not accept that. Is there an argument that it may be beneficial? Yes, that is the case. But it is also true that there is a significant proportion of our population, regardless of the inclusion of fluoride which, because of their diet and because of poor dental health, are still struggling in this area. Indeed, I think it is fair to say that it has had little impact in some of those areas.

The Queensland government will continue to advocate the benefits of fluoride. We will continue to advocate that those communities that have not included fluoride to date should include fluoride within the benefits of the subsidy for putting it in—because there are some smaller communities out there that may not be able to afford to do that. But we do respect that communities and local governments will have a differing view on this. Indeed, that is always something which has been philosophically at loggerheads with the underlying principle of the LNP that local government should have a right to determine what it seeks to do in its own local community. There has always been this philosophical disconnection between the mandatory inclusion of fluoride in our water supplies and the position of the LNP that communities do have a right to have a say and local governments do have a right to be able to reflect upon that when they make a decision on behalf of their community.

Indeed, this is also very consistent with the position that has been put forward by the honourable Minister for Local Government when he moved towards ensuring more empowerment for local governments with regard to their decision making. So this respects the role of local government. It understands the role of local government. We will continue to encourage local government as to the positive health benefits that can come from not only fluoridating your water supply but also continuing to fluoridate your water supply. Indeed, for those communities that may wish to fluoridate their water supplies that have not fluoridated their water supplies over and above the 87 per cent that have, then through government we will provide them with a subsidy which will be 100 per cent of the lowest cost price capital cost of actually putting those particular facilities in. That is something that will continue until 30 June 2014.

The other thing too is that, particularly with the water supplies in South-East Queensland where you basically have one entity which supplies that water, if any of those local governments were desirous of no longer fluoridating their water supply, they would have to bear the full cost of removing themselves from that network. So that in itself would be a significant disincentive for that happening as well.

It is about understanding the desires of local governments to be involved in this process. It really does very much fit around what is one of the key values, one of the key philosophical underpinnings of the LNP—and that is giving individuals and communities a greater capacity to be involved in the decision making about things which are important in their communities. Indeed, I think what we have seen over a period of time—whether it be from members on this side or even from the other side, if you go back and read some of the *Hansard* debate from the middle of the last decade—is that many people were searching their philosophical value system with regard to whether it was right to mandate something such as fluoride, which was in many ways seen as the imposition of a will of a government over and above what local governments may have wanted to be able to consider in their communities.

Indeed, in discussions and feedback from the large water suppliers and water providers around Queensland, I know there is a significant desire for those local governments to continue with the process of fluoridation, something which we would continue to encourage. But we do understand and we do respect the right of local governments in consultation with their local communities to make these decisions which are important to them, and this does very much carry forward that particular value.