



Speech by

Seath Holswich

MEMBER FOR PINE RIVERS

Hansard Tuesday, 10 July 2012

SOUTH-EAST QUEENSLAND WATER (DISTRIBUTION AND RETAIL RESTRUCTURING) AMENDMENT BILL

Mr HOLSWICH (Pine Rivers—LNP) (12.16 pm): I rise in support of the South-East Queensland Water (Distribution and Retail Restructuring) Amendment Bill and to offer a few short comments on this legislation. This bill will remove the special industrial relations measures that were introduced by the SEQ Distribution and Retail Water Reform Workforce Framework 2009 and the SEQ Distribution and Retail Water Retransfer Workforce Framework 2012, which applied to employees of the 10 South-East Queensland councils who transferred to water distributor-retailers in 2010 as well as employees from Allconnex water who transferred back to the Gold Coast, Logan and Redland city councils on 1 July this year.

I believe this is an important bill for a couple of key reasons. Firstly, the passing of this bill will allow water businesses and councils greater flexibility in managing staff which will ultimately lower staffing costs for these organisations. It gives back decision-making power to the employer rather than maintaining the special conditions mandated by the existing frameworks. The bill seeks to wind back the 2009 and 2012 legislation as far as is practicable to allow the employers to manage their industrial relations in a 'business as usual' manner without having the additional restrictions imposed.

The original framework saw a number of job tenure obligations and additional allowances imposed on South-East Queensland water businesses. These were unnecessary additional costs to the water businesses. As we all know, such charges are not simply absorbed by businesses; they are passed on to the end consumer in the form of higher charges. In this particular instance, they were passed on to South-East Queensland water users in the form of higher water bills. This is the second reason why I see this bill as important. It will ultimately contribute to reduced water charges for South-East Queensland householders and businesses. It is vitally important to the households and businesses of the Pine Rivers electorate that water costs are brought under control. Households and businesses in my electorate simply cannot continue to absorb regular increases in their water charges and any step that heads towards stemming these increasing costs will be welcomed by my electorate.

The Newman government is committed to lowering the cost of water for Queensland households and businesses. We went to this year's election with a commitment to implementing a four-point water plan to bring down water charges. That plan consisted of amalgamating the four bulk water entities to reduce the cost of supplying water; handing back control of water distribution and retail into councils, which in most instances were more efficient in managing the water resources in the first place; writing off non-performing water grid assets; and adopting a 40-year price path to repay the previous government's water grid debt.

One of the overarching components of that particular four-point plan is that we would seek to increase the overall efficiency of water delivery from the grid to the household. This bill streamlines the administrative component of the water network in South-East Queensland, allowing for cost savings that will ultimately be passed on to consumers. This legislation is just one of many small steps that all lead us in

the direction of a better managed water network, resulting ultimately in lower water charges for Queensland households and businesses. Importantly, though, as well as contributing to increased efficiencies and cost savings for water businesses and councils, I believe this bill also maintains the standard protections and entitlements for water business and council employees who will be affected by this legislation. These entitlements and conditions were a key focus of the State Development, Infrastructure and Industry Committee during our consideration of the bill.

This bill brings water business employees back in line with the conditions of other council employees whilst still maintaining important provisions such as no forced redundancies for a fixed period until 30 June 2013. The enterprise bargaining agreement that was negotiated in 2011 ensures that this requirement is maintained, which effectively makes that particular aspect of the existing legislation redundant.

This bill also ensures that the long service entitlements of Allconnex employees are preserved as they move back to being employed by their respective councils. I note the concerns that have already been raised that the time frame for this bill made it difficult for the committee to widely consult on the issues raised by the bill and to receive extensive written submissions, as is the usual method. However, given the time constraints of the bill, given the fact that Allconnex employees have now already moved back to their respective councils, I think the situation was somewhat unavoidable. In spite of this constraint and after the briefings that were provided during the committee phase, it is my opinion that this bill adequately achieves its dual aims of reducing administrative burden and costs for water businesses and councils as well as ensuring that there are proper transitional arrangements to protect employees. As such, I am pleased to be able to support this bill. I commend the bill to the House.