




Speech By
Trevor Watts

MEMBER FOR TOOWOOMBA NORTH

GASFIELDS COMMISSION BILL

 **Mr WATTS** (Toowoomba North—LNP) (5.15 pm): I rise today to support the Gasfields Commission Bill 2012. I think the Deputy Premier should be commended for bringing this bill to the House and ensuring that Queensland, a great state with great opportunity, has an organisation such as the GasFields Commission. We have some wonderful industries here in Queensland, but two pillars that we are very dependent on are resources and agriculture. When these two sectors, these two pillars of our community, might be drawn into conflict, we need sensible resolutions, cool heads and an organisation that can advise government independently without fear or favour to make sure that good decisions are made. That is the GasFields Commission's role, and I support that.

In and around the downs we have some opportunity for great development with the gas industry. Toowoomba, my home town, is booming with employment. Many people are involved in TAFE and university studies, all looking to get jobs and employment in the resource sector and in particular in the gas industry.

Mr Costigan: Great opportunities.

Mr WATTS: There are great opportunities. A lot of people studying in those institutions are interested in an agricultural future. So ensuring both these pillars are able to be successful is critical. That then becomes key to ensuring that we have the right policy. I believe the Gasfields Commission Bill is the right policy. I believe we have the right leadership. I think John Cotter will make a fine leader of this commission. They need to have the right people and the right balance of people on that commission. People such as Shane Charles, who knows the industry very well and is very well known in Toowoomba, can certainly bring advice to the minister and to the government departments through his role in the GasFields Commission.

I also want to talk about Steve Raine, whom I have known for a number of years, from the University of Southern Queensland. He is an expert in underground water. I really feel that this is the main area on which we need to focus our attention when we start looking at the development of the gas industry in Queensland. A lot of the noise that we hear is about underground water—how much is it going to take, how is it going to affect the irrigators, what is it going to do to the environment and various other aspects. We have to get the right balance. We have to get the balance right between these two key pillars of our economy, the resource sector and the agricultural sector. However, we also need to get the right balance for our economies and for the environment. Underground water is the key area of potential conflict.

I believe that we should be resourcing the University of Southern Queensland from federal money, universities being a federal responsibility. We should be resourcing that area and making sure that this research is being done and it is being done independently at a university from the region that has people who live there, drink the water of the Great Artesian Basin and have family members employed in both the agricultural industry and the resource sector. I cannot think of a better place to do the research. I cannot think of a better university to do the research. It is such a shame to have a federal government that would shamelessly rip funding away from a university like that and spend it in another area in order to fulfil an election promise with its Gonski. I really would recommend that we go

back and look seriously at research for the underground water. I certainly believe that Steve Raine, one of the GasFields Commission members, is someone who would be able to help us in achieving that goal.

I return to the bill. I think it is very important to ensure we engage the key stakeholders. I think industry has been out there trying to do that—I believe that the government has been trying to do that—but always from a certain perspective. Everybody, I feel, has now started to see the GasFields Commission as an independent body. It is great to see an independent body with the teeth required to do its job. This bill gives it the teeth. The powers include the ability to compel government agencies, gas companies and landholders to provide information so that the commission has the evidence it needs to fully understand the issues, make informed recommendations and provide an independent, balanced point of view on the industry. That is the critical part. This bill gives the commission the power to access all of that information and process it in a balanced and sensible way to make recommendations with a full understanding of various key stakeholders' interests. It really is the only body that will be capable of doing that. I think it is great that it will have the teeth to do that. Certainly the Deputy Premier should be commended for ensuring that is contained in the bill.

Queenslanders certainly want the benefits that come with the gas industry. They certainly want the revenue that the Queensland government will receive from the gas industry. They certainly want the jobs that will be provided by the development of the gas industry. So it becomes very important that they have confidence that decisions are being made in the favour of all Queenslanders. Therefore we need an independent body—'independent' is the key word in this—that can go out there and ask the hard questions and compel people to provide information to ensure its advice is independent, fair and balanced, based on a full knowledge of all the facts. I think Queenslanders deserve that. Certainly they need to have confidence in the body that is doing that. I believe that the GasFields Commission is able to do that.

There are several issues that need to be addressed as this industry develops across Queensland. We need to ensure the groundwater issues I have spoken about are solved. I personally believe that the University of Southern Queensland is the place that can facilitate solving some of those problems and reducing some of those tensions by developing the knowledge base so we can make good decisions. But we also need a social licence. The companies need to be out there working hard to ensure they develop a social licence with the communities and with the landholders.

Certainly we need to understand the land access issues. I have been out to Cecil Plains and I have spoken to several of the landholders out there. There are certainly some landholders out there who hold grave fears for what might happen with the development of this industry. I think it is critically important that those landholders have a place where their fears can be heard in a sensible way. Certainly the GasFields Commission can hear those fears and make recommendations, but ultimately it will be up to the government and the companies to ensure the development in very sensitive areas is done incredibly carefully. I would caution everybody when they look at Cecil Plains to hesitate for a moment and consider the value of the agricultural resource and the value of the resource under the ground and make sure the right balance is struck and is well managed. I believe that the GasFields Commission will be able to contribute greatly to ensuring that happens in an effective way.

I think it is also important that we have sustainable and orderly development. As this industry exploded on the scene in Queensland it was poorly legislated for and protected by the previous government. Some of the things it did have put communities under great pressure. I commend the Deputy Premier on the statutory regional planning process. It will put in place clear guidelines to ensure we have sustainable and orderly development as this industry rolls out for the benefit of all Queenslanders.

I think the key things here are, as I have mentioned, the right policy—and I believe that we have that right—the right leadership—and I believe we have that with the GasFields Commission, with John Cotter—and the right people helping as part of that team. I cannot think of anybody better than Steve Raine to be looking out for our underground water resource for everybody in Queensland. If you have the right people, the right policy and the right leadership then you will develop the right processes. Government will have good advice given to it about how to act and we will be able to develop the two critical pillars of our economy—agriculture and resources—in harmony because a government made the hard decisions to ensure that this great state of Queensland and the great opportunities presented to it are managed in an effective way so that we can all get the benefits. I commend the bill to the House.