




Speech By
Robbie Katter

MEMBER FOR MOUNT ISA

Record of Proceedings, 6 May 2014

WATER SUPPLY SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr KATTER** (Mount Isa—KAP) (11.22 pm): I rise to speak on the Water Supply Services Legislation Amendment Bill 2014. I am very grateful for the time that our chair and committee put into this bill, which allowed for very robust discussion. We had access to a lot of information. I am grateful for that, as I think it has given all members of the committee the advantage of being able to speak with some authority on the bill.

Water meters provide a vital connection between a water service provider's network and the home. Currently, the installation of water meters is classified as regulated plumbing work, which means that it can be performed only by an appropriately qualified and licensed plumber. The critical words here are 'qualified and licensed'. This bill has been introduced to allow authorised persons, that is, unlicensed water industry workers employed by water service providers, to install water meters. We have heard about many of the virtues of doing that, how it will increase the profitability of water corporations and streamline developments. I have listened to those arguments. Water service providers say that this will allow them to have water meters installed in remote areas where plumbers are not available and it will reduce their costs as they will no longer have to employ licensed plumbers. That is a very important point that I will come back to, as it impacts on regional areas, and I can speak with some authority on that. These moves have been opposed by major stakeholders such as the Plumbers Union Queensland, the Master Plumbers' Association, the Institute of Plumbing Inspectors Queensland and licensed plumbers across the state. They say that the proposed changes will have disastrous effects on the plumbing industry. These have included risks to public health and safety, the consequences of further deregulation of the water service industry leading to increased costs for consumers, and the destabilising of the plumbing trade. Generally I support the bill, apart from those aspects that relate to the water meters.

The installation and replacement of water meters is defined as plumbing work under the Plumbing and Drainage Act. Under current legislation, this work can be performed only by a licensed plumber. This ensures that that person has the necessary skills and qualifications to guard against poor quality work, protecting public health and safety. In contrast to what the minister says about there being in place indemnities in terms of fines for the corporations, I do not think that anything can replace the requirement that a tradesman has a four-year qualification. His livelihood depends on the quality of his work. If you are connecting the town water service into the house, there is one point where the plumber has to look at the work that has been done by the town water service provider at the water service meter. I am convinced that there will be situations where a person with four years' experience will say, 'Clearly this guy has been in the job for two weeks and now works for the water service provider. Despite his best efforts and despite doing a good job most of the time, there is no way that I can complete this work because I am a registered plumber of four years and my livelihood depends on this, so I will step in now and shut this down'. That is the safety aspect. You can never replace that by threatening corporations with a \$300,000 fine. That will not trickle down. It is the responsibility of the individual who performs the work. You will never replace a plumber's four years'

experience and the pride that he takes in his workmanship. That is why it is important to have them. I do not care what happens in other states. It is important to that safety. Personally, I would prefer to have that available to me.

This bill will allow an untrained and unlicensed authorised person, in a deregulated environment, to be employed by a water service provider to install and replace water meters. There are no requirements for minimum training or qualifications. For the past two decades, the Commonwealth, states and territories, together with the industry, have worked collaboratively to build this country's national vocational training system aligned to industry skills needs, high quality competency standards and the development of nationally recognised and portable skills and qualifications. Something we are not talking about enough is the sum total of skills and available opportunities for people to develop trades that flow into our manufacturing sector and other industries. If they do not have that base or if it is diminished somewhat, there will be a lack of skills. You could say that comes out in efficiencies in other areas of industry, but I would argue that the cost of removing that benefit for licensed plumbers is going to have inadvertent effects on industries, and that has not been discussed here. Enabling the approximately 80 water service providers and local governments to determine individually the types and levels of skills and training without specification against minimum national qualifications or standards, will inevitably result in inconsistency in the skills and abilities of workers, a lack of transferability of skills and attendant risks to potable water supply.

We can all stand here and say that we are going to put safeguards in place and that there will be fines for corporations if the work is performed poorly, but I cannot get my head around how you replace four years training and pride in workmanship. They are qualified and trained people. The whole thrust of this bill is to reduce the cost to the developer or the water corporation that is running the utility. There will always be tension between public safety and the quality of the work and the cost. If the intent is to drive down costs, obviously there will be a diminution in the quality of the workmanship. No level of protection is going to protect you from that, because once you allow it in you have opened the floodgates. What is to stop us, in another 10 years' time, going that bit further on other areas within the home that do not need to be licensed.

In contrast, to obtain a plumbing licence a person has to complete a four-year apprenticeship under the supervision of a licensed plumber, with competencies set under the national training package. A plumbing apprenticeship must also be completed through a registered training organisation to meet its national requirements and industry standards. This bill does not properly address the level of training that is required. That skill base could be lost when we reduce the work that is available to those with that skill base.

One of the main reasons behind the proposed changes is that it will reduce their costs because they will be able to employ water industry workers rather than licensed plumbers. However, many local governments and water service providers are currently paying their plumbers a lower rate than their water industry workers. For example, in their enterprise bargaining agreements Queensland Urban Utilities is paying water industry workers \$35 per hour and trained licensed plumbers \$29 per hour. Logan City Council is paying water industry workers \$30 per hour and trained licensed plumbers \$26 per hour.

Water service providers are responsible for ensuring that the water they supply is safe for consumption. However, using an unlicensed person may lead to errors in installation, such as meters being installed backwards, dirt or mud entering the pipes or cross-contamination between potable and non-potable water supplies. Depending on the type of contamination, it may be some time before these errors are identified.

An example of a cross-connection incident involved the Pimpama Waste Water Treatment Plant at the Gold Coast in 2009. A cross-connection between water supplies led to recycled water being diverted through potable water lines to approximately 630 homes. We are not saying that this is going to happen all the time, but if this is being done to reduce costs somewhere along the line someone is going to take their eye off the ball. We are allowing unlicensed people to do what four-year trained people did before. The risk of these sorts of things happening must increase. It stands to reason and would defy logic to say otherwise.

An unlicensed person is not comparatively accountable to any independent body and will not be subject to these same penalties. It is unclear through this legislation whether the responsibility for this work would be placed on the authorised person who performed the work or the water service provider.

It is clear that the deregulation of the water industry has reduced accountability for water service providers. In turn, this has increased public dissatisfaction, which is particularly relevant to water service providers' pricing structures and approach to business.

I would like to go back to the point about this saving councils in remote areas money. There is a flip side to that argument that I would like to put forward. I personally know many plumbers who work in these areas. It may not comprise a significant portion of their work, but it represents a portion of their work that maintains their viability. We may have a plumber who operates in a region and services a big area and goes from town to town doing work. This is the sort of thing that maintains his viability. If we pull this work out he will leave town and go back to the coast. We then have to rely on people from Townsville to fly out and do this work.

This might be a good outcome for the local council and the economy, but there is a social impact. I would not have a plumber who lives in my remote town to service me because he no longer has that work available to him. The council saved a bit of money but we lost a plumber from town. In that respect, this has the ability to hurt those of us in rural and remote areas.

The bill will have an extremely detrimental effect on the plumbing industry in Queensland. The impact extends beyond the obvious economic effects on small- to medium-size plumbing businesses. Consultation with the Plumbers Union has reinforced the view that if the legislation comes into effect, it will be the first step towards de-skilling a complex and vital trade which has far-reaching ramifications.

These impacts include fewer apprentices being trained, fewer plumbers being able to sustain businesses and provide essential services in remote and regional areas and creating a division of labour within the plumbing industry. If the intent of this legislation is to reduce costs by using more unauthorised persons, then the net effect must be to reduce the number of qualified plumbers used in Queensland. If we agree to this bill in its current form then we all accept that we are going to reduce the number of plumbers we have in Queensland. That will have inadvertent effects beyond just property development. I ask all members to consider that tonight. For that reason, I will be opposing some sections of this bill.