




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR GREGORY

Record of Proceedings, 9 November 2016

**WATER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL; ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION
(UNDERGROUND WATER MANAGEMENT) AND OTHER LEGISLATION
AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Mr MILLAR** (Gregory—LNP) (9.39 pm): The Water Legislation Amendment Bill deals with the use of that most essential resource—water. As a former member of the Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources Committee when we were examining these bills, I have two overriding concerns about the bill as it stands. The first is the primary objective of the bill. As members know, my electorate of Gregory has suffered under epic drought conditions for the past five years. During this great dry, the blessing of water from the Great Artesian Basin has been one of the few sustaining graces. Together with the green oasis that is the Emerald irrigation area, this experience provides a thought-provoking context from which to view these bills.

Simply put, this legislation seeks to replace the term ‘responsible and productive’ with the term ‘sustainable’ as the guiding objective of our water management. At first glance, this would just seem to be word play. As Dr Dale Miller of AgForce told the committee, responsible use must, by its very definition, be sustainable use. Only sustainable water management can provide reliability, and reliability is the holy grail of water management.

One of the most interesting and successful experiments in water management in the electorate of Gregory—and indeed in Australia—is the Great Artesian Basin Sustainability Initiative, or the GABSI. I call on the Minister for Natural Resources to look at the GABSI program when it comes to capping bores and make sure that graziers who want to fund and continue to cap bores have the access to the funds to be able to do that.

The purpose of the GABSI is to protect the Great Artesian Basin’s underground aquifers by capping the free-flowing bores and replacing the historic drains with modern piping. This will limit water lost to evaporation and provide the control needed for active management. The Australian, state and territory governments have worked with bore owners in the Great Artesian Basin for 17 years to address the challenge. Given that it started in 1999, GABSI would have to be amongst the longest running and most successful multi government initiatives in Australian water management. Interestingly, it was campaigned for by landholders and bore owners. They had to work very hard to bring governments on board. I must commend one of my constituents, Mr John Seccombe, in this regard and thank him for his continuing dedication to the cause.

The GABSI has increased our scientific knowledge of the hydrology and ecology of this vast basin, and GABSI has been astonishingly successful. Where we were losing water pressure due to a lack of management, now we are seeing water pressures and supplies returned, which is extremely important for Western Queensland. GABSI shows us that Queensland primary producers are tremendous guardians who have a lot to teach us about sustainability and balance. GABSI aims to

ensure that the artesian basin water resource is sustainably used. The success of GABSI has created a situation where we can specifically manage the need for water to maintain natural artesian ecosystems, as well as a reliable and sustainable supply of water for artesian towns and for the primary producers who provide the economic underpinnings of Western Queensland.

GABSI shows us what good water management policy is: nature, society and economy are all brought into balance. As Dr Miller from AgForce said, responsible water use is, by definition, sustainable, but the reverse does not necessarily apply and this is where I worry about this piece of legislation. 'Sustainable' can be used to exclude, or at least subordinate, all water use not related to the natural environment. The committee was troubled by this. What is the definition of the word 'sustainable' in this context, and who defines it? The whole issue is that the word itself is debatable, so there will always be different opinions of how to apply it. The use of vague words in legislation is risky because all users could be held hostage to a single, ideological viewpoint. In the context of water management, one of the reasons the term 'sustainability' is vague is that science in this area is so rapidly evolving. The Fairbairn Dam near Emerald is a great example of this. It is a great asset and is Queensland's second biggest dam and it has seen the development of extensive, high-value irrigation cropping—something that I have known for a very long time and something—

Mr Costigan interjected.

Mr MILLAR: Absolutely. I take that interjection from the member for Whitsunday. The dam is not a flood mitigation dam. It is solely an irrigation dam formed across the upper Nogoa. It has created enormous prosperity in the Central Highlands, supporting towns and mines as well as irrigation farming. It has also provided wonderful research opportunities which have greatly expanded our scientific knowledge in hydrology and ecology. A feature of the dam management is that from September to February, when a rain event triggers a flow upstream, environmental water is allowed to flow out of the dam downstream. This means that the flow below the dam echoes the upstream rain event. This has been heavily studied by ecologists and has been found to be very successful. Again, in a different setting, we have found a scientific balance between economic imperatives, social needs and ecological requirements.

The Fairbairn Dam construction was fully funded by the federal government and built by the Snowy Hydro authority, so it cannot really be claimed by the Queensland government. Unfortunately, to develop a similar piece of water infrastructure today seems to be beyond our capacity, which is very sad. We cannot seem to look beyond our comforting ideologies and actually use our brains. If members do not believe me, then they should consider this: one part of this Labor government is busily spending millions of dollars provided to them by the federal government to complete the 'business case' for the Rookwood Weir. As I have said before, the construction of the Rookwood Weir would see another \$1 billion of agricultural production in Central Queensland, with an additional economic multiplier of about three. That is the business case, right there. It is great to see that at least some members of the Palaszczuk government appreciate that.

Mr Butcher interjected.

Mr MILLAR: I hope the member for Gladstone is supportive of Rookwood Weir. I hope he gets behind that because it will provide water for his town of Gladstone. In the meantime, I am standing here debating a piece of legislation from the same Labor government that, if passed, would make the construction of the Rookwood Weir next to impossible because it removes the pathway for the assessment and approval of greenfield irrigated agriculture projects within the Water Act. It removes it, full stop. Once again, the left faction of the Palaszczuk government is running its own version of the government. This version is not so concerned about job losses or debt; it focuses on pandering to the Greens, as we saw with the Vegetation Management Act and the Nature Conservation Act before that.

Mr Costigan: They've got form.

Mr MILLAR: They have got form. I take that interjection from the member for Whitsunday. This lot need Greens preferences and they will sacrifice the prosperity of Queensland to get them. Meanwhile, 22,900 Queensland jobs have been lost this year under the Labor government. That is from the ABS, seasonally adjusted, August 2016. No other member knows better than me how tough rural Queensland is doing it, yet it is agriculture that has been Queensland's unsung hero.

At the beginning of August, Treasurer Pitt issued a media release highlighting that Queensland's exports have risen while Australia's are falling. The reason for the rise was an increase in agricultural exports. As I have said before, Queensland agriculture is a hero. It may be going high tech, but as it becomes more high tech, it becomes even more sustainable. I have personally witnessed this.

Queensland agriculture has the potential to grow from \$17 billion to \$30 billion over the next 10 years, underwriting our earnings, increasing our prosperity and creating real, permanent jobs. Queensland's primary producers not only give us our exports; they provide urban Queensland with its biggest manufacturing industry in meat processing. This part of the economy can also be grown to include further value adding, such as biofuels manufacture. As I never tire of saying, if you want a signpost to the future status of agriculture, compare the starting salaries for many of our agricultural graduates with that of, say, law graduates.

With no major water development option, this bill if passed puts us all on the wrong side of history, and that brings me to my second concern. The bipartisan committee could not recommend the bill be passed without a development pathway for major new water infrastructure. The committee's first recommendation is the equivalent of being told by the teacher, 'You haven't answered the question so go back and do your homework again.' I sat on the committee and I can tell members that the reason for needing a pathway for the development of new major water infrastructure still exists. The Rookwood Weir is required now, and not just for the high-value agriculture it can produce or the 2,000 jobs associated with that. Rookwood Weir is also intended to supply water security for Gladstone townspeople, and I hope the member for Gladstone understands that.

Mr BAILEY: Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise to a point of order. I raise the point of relevance. The member is going all around the world. This has nothing to do with the bill. I ask him to come back to the bill.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Miss Barton): Order! Members, I am listening carefully to the contribution of the member for Gregory. The member for Gregory has the call.

Mr MILLAR: For the benefit of the Minister for Main Roads and Minister for Water Supply I point out that by removing the development option, the bill kills the Rookwood Weir dead. That is where the relevance is. We will not be able to attract the funding and if by some miracle we did, the development could not be approved. In taking such an extreme stance, the legislation also minimises the benefits that Queensland can seek from the federal government's Northern Australia Infrastructure Facility Fund, something on which I hope the Minister for Main Roads and Minister for Water Supply is keen. I sincerely ask how the government in 2016 can put up water legislation that removes any pathway for development of major new water infrastructure from the Queensland Water Act.

Just quickly, I will move on to the Environmental Protection (Underground Water Management) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. I thank the member for Whitsunday for his contribution to the parliament. As the member for Gregory in Central Queensland, I think he speaks for many people and what he said in his speech is absolutely right. The people of Central Queensland are wondering where the next job is coming from. We all remember that last year, unfortunately, we saw 500 jobs go from Townsville with QNI.

Mr Butcher: Eight hundred jobs.

Mr MILLAR: Eight hundred jobs; I take that interjection from the member for Gladstone. However, what about the up to 20,000 jobs in the mining industry from the Bowen Basin that have disappeared? What about that? What about the mining downturn that we have seen in Central Queensland which has had a major impact not only on mums and dads and kids but also on businesses right around Central Queensland? These people are looking for opportunities. These people are looking to make sure that they can stay in the mining industry. They are skilled in mining. They have been doing it for 25 or 30 years. They have had a massive impact. Every mining family in Central Queensland has made a massive injection into the economy in Central Queensland not only for small business but for local communities, local sporting groups and local schools. They made a significant contribution to the Central Queensland economy.

As a young bloke growing up in the Central Highlands, I went to school with many kids from mining families. They all played a major role, whether it was in the local Rugby League team such as the Tigers, the Capella Road Runners back in the eighties, the Springsure Mountain Men, the Blackwater Devils who turned into the Blackwater Crushers or the Bluff Rabbitohs. All of those mining families have made a significant impact in that region and they have played a significant role. What they are looking for and what is important here is the next opportunity to continue mining in Central Queensland.

Make no mistake, the protection of landholders and landholders' rights are absolutely paramount. As a person from agriculture and a person who has been involved in agriculture all my life, I believe it is absolutely important that we protect landholders' rights. What we do not like is green activists from the south—from Melbourne or from overseas—coming to dictate terms to us on how we should continue our economic productivity in Central Queensland. If people walk down the street of Emerald, Capella, Tieri, Clermont, Blackwater or Middlemount they will find that those families are looking for an

opportunity to continue living in those regions—not being pulled away and having to leave that region and having to leave those jobs. It is important that we are able to provide some certainty for future mining opportunities in Central Queensland communities—for companies such as Adani, which has been waiting for a long time, and Acland, which has been waiting a long time. This is about people who are putting money on the table, who are spending it in business. We have to make sure that we continue to provide jobs for people in regional Queensland because they are the people who provide the wealth for Queensland. I call on members to continue to support these people.