




Speech By
Lachlan Millar

MEMBER FOR GREGORY

Record of Proceedings, 16 February 2017

WATER (LOCAL MANAGEMENT ARRANGEMENTS) AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr MILLAR** (Gregory—LNP) (3.35 pm): Mr Deputy Speaker Stewart, before I go on, I congratulate you on your new position as a Temporary Speaker and I look forward to working with you.

I rise to speak in support of the Water (Local Management Arrangements) Amendment Bill to restructure and transfer up to eight SunWater channel irrigation schemes to local management arrangements. The bill applies to Bundaberg, Burdekin-Haughton, Eton, St George, Theodore, Lower Mary, Mareeba and of course the scheme I know a lot about, which is the Emerald irrigation scheme, which is in my electorate of Gregory. That scheme has been the cornerstone for the Emerald and Central Highlands region. The construction of Fairbairn Dam, finished in 1969, and has played a critical role in making sure that we have expanded agriculture in that region.

Firstly, can I say how disappointing it has been that the Labor government have taken two years to finalise this process. Yes, it was two years, even though everything was ready to go. All they had to do was get the legislation going.

Mr Power interjected.

Mr MILLAR: Yes, it was two years ago. It was signed, sealed and ready to go. It was sitting there. It was something that this government could have easily put forward in the first sitting week of the parliament back in 2015. They did not even look at it. They left people in limbo for over two years. All the hard work had been done. The meetings had taken place under the former LNP government. The establishment of the local LMA interim boards had already been established and were doing the heavy lifting to take local management to the irrigators and stakeholders. It was already done. All the minister had to do was get this legislation going, which we are doing today. However, it is two years later. In fact, the agricultural cabinet subcommittee—and I mention the former deputy premier, the member for Callide; the former minister for water, the member for Caloundra; the former natural resources minister, the member for Hinchinbrook; and the former member for Toowoomba South, John McVeigh. They put this all together. They did all the hard work and the heavy lifting and made sure that this was ready to go. It took two years for members opposite to bring this up. What were they waiting for?

Mr Power: How many times have you said that?

Mr MILLAR: I say it because I think it is important that people know. Why did they let people out in that region wait for two years before they got this legislation up? They could have had this legislation ready to go in the first week of the parliamentary term in 2015. Two years!

Mr Costigan: Low-hanging fruit.

Mr MILLAR: Low-hanging fruit. They did not even know what the LMAs were. They probably did not even realise that we had an irrigation industry in Queensland. It is not rocket science. The other states had already completed the process. Local management of irrigation schemes had commenced

in other states—in New South Wales, South Australia, Western Australia—in line with the aims of the National Water Initiative, but because of the delay from the minister, Queensland was lagging behind. The minister had dropped the ball on local management authorities in this state, which is so reliant on agriculture. These irrigation schemes are all about high-value agriculture.

It was all part of the same sad state of affairs, which meant that Queensland did not have a department of agriculture and fisheries or forestry when the LNP took office in 2012. We did not even have a department of agriculture. Even as the Bligh government was proposing to convert stock routes to conservation corridors, Western Queensland was on the countdown to an epic drought and those stock routes proved vital in maintaining the state's breeding herds. These are issues that are so important to Queenslanders, so when the LNP came to power agriculture finally had a voice again. Farmers and graziers had real concerns about the dire state of their industry which were going to be addressed by the LNP government. Of course I pay tribute to Minister John McVeigh, the member for Toowoomba South, the member for Callide, the member for Hinchinbrook and the member for Caloundra, the minister for water at that time, who got those LMAs going and made an effort to ensure that we had interim boards engaged with irrigators to make sure we got this process going.

I am someone who is very familiar with the Emerald Irrigation Scheme. The Emerald irrigation area is fed by the Fairbairn Dam, which was funded by a federal grant and built by the Snowy Mountains Authority. The dam was completed in 1968—that is nearly 50 years ago—and it has transformed not just Emerald but the whole Central Highlands, an area as big as Tasmania. The Nogoia-Mackenzie community of irrigator farmers is a very innovative one. It was first introduced to water trading as a way of ensuring that water allocations were used for the most economically beneficial purpose. I have a deep understanding of the Emerald irrigation community. My family are irrigators in the Emerald irrigation area and grow cotton, mung beans, chickpeas and a variety of crops, so I understand the possibilities offered by local management. I am very proud that this is a project which was commenced under the LNP government.

We moved through a methodical process with a working group to see if this concept was viable. Stage 2 saw detailed investigations into the financial, legal and engineering considerations. We also needed to ensure that there was sufficient local support for such a transfer. With the election of the Labor government everything seemed to come to a halt, finally grinding back in a motion in September 2016. Five schemes, including Emerald, are now ready to proceed with a business plan in place. I congratulate all of the interim boards and their chairs for the hard work they have done and for the patience they have shown over the last two years to finally get this legislation to the Queensland parliament. What is needed now is a sincere and honest effort to make this work. I know that the board chair, Annette Smith, and her fellow board members have strong local support for the success of the scheme, and I know they have come to the task with a 100 per cent commitment to make it work.

Another issue that I am also concerned about is the prospect of the LMAs being left with a financial headache. The government needs to make sure that these LMAs have the right sinking fund and the right finances to continue on if they are to go to local management. They cannot be left in a situation where the infrastructure around those schemes is lagging and they have to continue to prop it up with higher prices. There has to be a commitment from this government to ensure those local management areas have the proper financial settlement and proper financial opportunities to make sure that the infrastructure and the maintenance of those LMAs is up to date when that takeover happens. You do not want to short-change those LMAs because it will have a huge impact on water prices, which will have an impact on agricultural production in those areas.

Let's be honest. I know it has been suggested that SunWater and those irrigation schemes were not profitable, but there have been millions and millions of dollars in dividends from SunWater handed over to the government. We are talking about tens and tens of millions of dollars in dividends from SunWater—which is a government owned corporation—which is given to the government. I believe the government owes it to these local management areas to make sure that when the money is transferred they have the right amount of financial assistance to make sure that the infrastructure of those irrigation schemes is kept up to date before they are handed over. I implore those opposite to ensure that that happens.

Water infrastructure is very important to Central Queensland. We need to make sure that we continue to invest in water infrastructure from the state government's point of view. I call on the Labor government to get behind Rookwood Weir. We are looking at \$1 billion in agricultural production and thousands of jobs in agriculture. I think it is important that we get behind Rookwood Weir and make sure that we make it happen. This is an opportunity for those opposite to make sure that we have more jobs in agriculture and secure water resources around the Central Queensland region which will grow

agriculture. What I find alarming is that when the Premier and the Labor Party and cabinet were in Rockhampton and they announced an expansion of the Rockhampton Correctional Centre there was no business case: it happened just like that.

Mr Costigan: Just like that on the run.

Mr MILLAR: There we go! But we need a business case for Rookwood Weir. They continue to complain and ask, 'Where is the business case?' but where was the business case for 200 jobs for the Rockhampton Correctional Centre? Yet there are 1,000 jobs available for the construction of Rookwood Weir. Once you have Rookwood Weir constructed there will be \$1 billion in agricultural production and 1,000 jobs in agriculture, but we continue to delay.

Mr Costigan: I wonder why?

Mr MILLAR: I do not know. I take that interjection from the member for Whitsunday. I call on the Minister for Natural Resources to get behind Rookwood Weir because it will create 1,000 jobs and \$1 billion in agricultural production. That is the way forward for agriculture in Central Queensland—we just need to do it.