



Speech By
Lachlan Millar

MEMBER FOR GREGORY

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WATER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr MILLAR** (Gregory—LNP) (12.13 pm): I rise to make a contribution to this bill, which will amend and modernise the Water Act 2000. When it comes to the Labor Party and managing water, I do not have trust. Nearly 22 years ago, in a first interaction between the Labor Party and irrigators from the Central Highlands—without consultation, without a letter to us or anything—the Labor Party of the Beattie era put a moratorium on overland flow in the Fitzroy Basin. That was absolutely devastating. When it comes to water and the Labor Party, I do not have trust. By the sound of those blokes outside, I do not think they are happy with it either!

Arrangements around water management are vital to the prosperity of regional Queensland and, indeed, the productivity of Queensland's agriculture and horticulture industries. They have always been and will continue to be a pillar of this state's economy. It is therefore a concern to see the key submissions to the committee inquiry point to the lack of detailed consultation with stakeholders. What happened to us 22 years ago continues to happen today when it comes to water legislation with the Labor Party, be it the Kalamia Cane Growers' concerns about the potential yearly renewals creating changes to water licence conditions—even when there have been no changes in circumstances—the Queensland Farmers' Federation's concerns that the cost of the installation and maintenance of the new meters might send some enterprises to the wall or AgForce's concerns around the lack of detail when it comes to the development of regulations. Dr Dale Miller of AgForce advised the committee—

We do not know, as far as I am aware, what the department has done with that information in terms of making adjustments to what firstly had been proposed.

This lack of clarity and transparency is of great concern when it affects an essential input for all agriculture. Having said that, I will always support fair and efficient arrangements to manage the most vital of our natural resources. Water must be carefully managed and must be used in the most beneficial way, socially and economically. Transparency and accountability are key, because we do not want to see corruption in either water management or water use.

As many members will know, I grew up on an irrigation farm in the Nogoa MacKenzie irrigation area and I also spent time working with the Fitzroy Basin Food & Fibre Association when work to better map and understand the vital river basin was really just gaining momentum. That of course continues, but I must say that we have come a long way since those days. We have come a long way in our understanding of the need to have whole-of-basin knowledge of our river systems and good data on the impacts of human activities on river systems. This knowledge, at both a macro and a micro level, should be the foundation of effective, fair and efficient water management plans. The advances in this field have been greatly assisted by the huge advances in internet access and the Internet of Things in the last 15 years or so.

We are amending the Water Act 2000. That was the year everyone was in a lather about Y2K. While we had mobile phones, they were not yet smartphones as we know them today, when we walk around carrying a connection to the internet in our hand. Parallel to that has been the creation of the

so-called Internet of Things. In natural resource management, for example, it has given us the ability to introduce digital measurement on both electricity and water. These are key inputs for our primary producers. It is vital to maintain fair and equitable access to them if Queensland is to prosper. Queensland agriculture has always been at the forefront of adapting to change. The digital management of farms and agricultural enterprises is widespread in a way that would surprise many non-farmers. All in all, it is pleasing to see the minister bringing to the House amendments which will allow Queensland's Water Act to reflect these technology advances, even though it has taken three years to get us here.

My first concern is always to see rural Queenslanders treated as fairly as urban Queenslanders. This act does not ensure that. In the suburbs of South-East Queensland you can install as many rainwater tanks as you wish and harvest as much rainwater as you can. You do not have to account to anyone for taking this water. Indeed, the state government makes no attempt to measure how much water is being harvested in this way; nor does it attempt to assess the impact of this harvest on the river systems in South-East Queensland. Because it concerns quantities for domestic use, this is seen as both unnecessary and impractical but, under these amendments, licences which provide water allocations for domestic and stock use by rural householders could be exposed to unnecessary costs and red tape. I have many such licence holders in my electorate. We often enjoy a chat with our neighbours at the local water pumping station such as the one on Talafa Road in Emerald. This is where clusters of rural householders come to pump water to their homes. Other more remote households will pump from bores or ring tanks to collect overland flow on their individual properties.

Stock and domestic water licences have traditionally been viewed by the Queensland government as a way of ensuring all Queensland households have access to water for domestic use, even if they are too rural or remote to have access to an urban treated water supply. Such water entitlements have traditionally been considered as extremely low risk in terms of exceeding their entitlements. The minister has given no indication as to why this assessment has changed. I would argue that they are not just a low risk, they are essential to ensuring all Queensland households have adequate access to water. The LNP will move an amendment which seeks to exempt water allocations for stock and domestic uses from being metered. I urge all members to support that amendment.

This brings me to the matter of meters. While I am pleased to see the modernisation of water metering, the cost of these modern meters can range up to \$30,000. This represents a considerable investment. Furthermore, these advanced stations need to be maintained, recalibrated from time to time and are vulnerable to the dangers of weather events such as flood damage. I have real concerns that the proposed subsidy does not reflect the true costs which will be borne by producers. For domestic consumers of our produce, this can only lead to an increase in prices at a time of inflation and cost-of-living concerns. For our exporters, it will be a disadvantage for our Queensland producers operating in international markets. As the old saying goes, we are price takers not price makers.

Lastly, I would urge the minister to ensure that local contractors can install and maintain this system as this is the only way to ensure the robustness of the regime. Skilling the regions makes us more resilient so let us see a local approach right from the commencement of this bill. Like AgForce, I urge the minister to commit to a full review after five years to ensure the amendments are working as intended without serious impacts on our primary production.