



Speech by

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WATER AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL AND SOUTH EAST QUEENSLAND WATER (RESTRUCTURING) BILL

Mr CRIPPS (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (9.31 pm): I rise to make a contribution to the debate on the Water and Other Legislation Amendment Bill and the South East Queensland Water (Restructuring) Bill, which are being debated tonight as cognate bills. I intend to confine my remarks to some of the provisions of the Water and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. That bill proposes to amend a number of acts to implement a range of demand management measures in the south-east Queensland region to address the continuing drought and contribute to long-term sustainable water use; to implement a range of short- and long-term demand management measures in areas outside the south-east Queensland region also experiencing water supply issues because of drought; and to contribute to long-term sustainable water use in areas not experiencing drought.

South-east Queensland is experiencing the effects of a very severe drought. The combined water levels in the region's major water supply storages are at historic lows. In response to this dire situation, the state government has been forced to implement unprecedented water restrictions to try to achieve significant water savings by reducing residential, commercial, industrial and agricultural water use. The state government has set up yet another bureaucracy, the Water Commission, to deal with this problem, and it really is an indictment on this government that further savings must be made to try to stretch out the region's water supply simply so that the huge centralised population of south-east Queensland does not run out of drinking water, a basic requirement for the community to survive.

This government has failed to do any basic forward planning for the increased water supply requirements of the communities across south-east Queensland which have been growing rapidly for some time. It is not as if the strong population growth in this area has crept up on the government. So the recent scrambling and enormous emergency expenditure that has been undertaken in recent times really are a panicked and rushed response to the water crisis.

The Water Commission has developed a range of measures to address serious water supply issues in south-east Queensland, including the establishment of a regional water grid in the region. Some areas of regional Queensland, outside of the south-east corner of the state, are experiencing similar pressures on water supplies as a result of the prolonged drought. However, some are not, including my electorate, but it appears that this bill will apply its provisions arbitrarily to areas of Queensland without water supply problems as well as to those that do face these particular challenges. This is typical behaviour from this state Labor government to impose a set template on all areas of the state regardless of the varying needs of the community across this large and diverse state. I will speak more about that later. The bill proposes to assist in managing water supplies for urban use in the short term and promote ongoing water use efficiencies for the longer term and, in doing so, claims to be implementing a plan to enhance water security both in south-east Queensland and in other regions of the state.

Since 2002 the Integrated Planning Act has been the instrument through which the Department of Natural Resources and Water has regulated activities that occur using water. However, the Water Act is

the instrument through which the department gives the resource approval linked to those activities. As such, the bill proposes changes to the legislation to reconcile some inconsistencies between the Integrated Planning Act and the Water Act. I note that during the recent debate on the Environmental Protection and Other Legislation Amendment Bill, amendments were debated that reconciled inconsistencies between the Water Act and the Coastal Protection and Management Act. There seems to be a pattern emerging whereby the Water Act is a bit untidy as far as its interface with other legislation is concerned and a series of bills is moving through this place to try to clean up the legislative arrangements under which Queensland's water resources are managed.

The bill also proposes to implement a range of demand management measures that require amendments to legislation. Restrictions are proposed for the use of groundwater taken from backyard bores. This measure is proposed to give the Water Commission in south-east Queensland and individual water service providers in other regions of Queensland the power to impose water restrictions on the use of water from backyard bores where the groundwater is being taken from the same source that supplies or supplements the town water supply.

Many people have laid out considerable sums of money to put down bores on their property to try to achieve some sort of independence as far as water is concerned, and there is a long-held and important principle at stake here that private property owners should be able to access water on their property. I acknowledge that the severe drought conditions mean that water resources are short, but it is so typical of this state government to brush aside the rights of private property owners. Many of these private property owners used this bore water for purposes other than drinking water so as to save water available to their property through the town water supply, which is suitable for drinking. So I hope that the state government will use a degree of common sense when applying the provisions of this legislation so as not to disadvantage those Queenslanders who have put up their own money to achieve some independence as far as water availability is concerned and make sure available drinking water resources are used for just that—drinking.

I wish to express my concerns about the proposal in this bill to provide for the creation of outdoor water use conservation plans as it relates to the practical circumstances of the communities in my electorate. This measure will apply only to areas outside of south-east Queensland and requires water service providers to have an outdoor water use conservation plan for reducing outdoor water use and promoting efficient water use by customers. A retail water service is defined under the act, but in general terms a retail water service equates to the supply of reticulated water to urban customers. The plan prepared by a water service provider must be consistent with guidelines issued by the regulator—in this case the Department of Natural Resources and Water—and include any water restrictions imposed or to be imposed by the water service provider; details of measures to reduce outdoor water use and promote efficient water use by customers; and the way the service provider intends to implement and ensure compliance with these measures.

This initiative sounds harmless enough, but I would like the minister to reassure me and the communities in my electorate that the development of these outdoor water conservation plans will take into account the relative availability of water in different areas of Queensland serviced by different water providers and will not be imposed unnecessarily on water providers in areas where there is an abundance of water, like many areas in my electorate. This new requirement aims to ensure urban water users are applying water-efficient practices at all times and not only during drought. Examples of these types of practices that may be contained in the plan include restricting the use of garden sprinklers during the middle of the day, education programs, alternate garden watering days and rebate schemes for water-efficient devices. Again, these sound harmless enough, but the degree to which they are applied needs to be done with common sense.

In the Wet Tropics sometimes we have dry spells—relatively speaking. I grew up in the little township of Tully in my electorate, widely recognised as competing directly with the township of Babinda in the electorate of the member for Mulgrave for the title of the wettest populated area in Australia. Tully has the record for the highest rainfall in a calendar year in a populated area of 7.9 metres in 1950. In 2002 the Wet Tropics experienced one of those relatively dry years. In that year Tully, which usually receives an annual average rainfall of about 4.2 metres, had only half of that, recording only 2.1 metres in that year. In 2002 Babinda, which also usually receives an annual average rainfall of 4.2 metres, only had 2.1 metres. Innisfail, in between the townships of Tully and Babinda, usually records an average rainfall of 3.5 metres of rain, but in 2002 only 1.9 metres fell on Innisfail. Further south in the 'dry' areas of the region, Ingham usually has an average of 2.1 metres of rain, but in 2002 Ingham struggled through with only 1.1 metres of rain.

As a young fellow growing up in Tully I do remember that at one time we had some sprinkler restrictions for a while because we were experiencing one of those relatively dry spells. I think we went for a few months during the winter without any rain. I am not trying to be half smart or brag about these generous rainfall figures. I am genuinely concerned about those areas of the state where water is in short

supply from this prolonged and severe drought. My heart goes out to the people of those areas and it worries me that many families, especially in regional and rural areas in central, western and southern areas of the state, are in very difficult drought conditions. However, in my area we really do not face the same challenges and are often forced to pump water off our properties and drain them so that our crops will not rot in the paddock.

My point is that water service providers in the Wet Tropics, which are basically the local councils in the area—councils such as the Cardwell shire, Johnstone shire and the Hinchinbrook shire—should not be forced into developing restrictive and unnecessary outdoor water conservation plans which will impose permanent standing water restrictions on communities in these areas which do not need them and should not have them. Our dry spells are still pretty wet. We are fortunate to have an abundance of water and we understand that, but it is also part of our lifestyle to enjoy the water that we are blessed with and I am proud to defend that lifestyle. It is part of our lifestyle in the Wet Tropics of Queensland, which includes a lot of the communities in my electorate of Hinchinbrook, that we, generally speaking, have consistently high levels of rainfall and water is plentiful. We enjoy a lifestyle in a hot climate and we have the capacity to use our pools, water our gardens and clean our cars when we need to. The people in the Wet Tropics are not wasteful or naughty for using water in this way. There is still more than enough for drinking; there is still more than enough for the rivers and the streams and the wetlands in the Wet Tropics.

Indeed, the former Premier, Mr Beattie, floated an idea earlier this year to pinch a very significant amount of water out of the Wet Tropics of north Queensland when he took out full-page advertisements in newspapers advocating a bastardised version of the Bradfield Scheme which proposed to turn the water from the Tully, the Herbert and the Burdekin rivers inland to end up in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. The mighty Tully and Herbert rivers flow through my electorate of Hinchinbrook. Earlier this year this state government was floating the idea of pinching a very significant amount of water out of the Wet Tropics of north Queensland. It must have believed at that time that we had plenty to spare. Now, only a few months later, it appears to be intending to provide for the development of permanent standing water restrictions on communities in the same areas which do not need them and should not have them. It is just an example of the way this government makes it up as it goes along, depending on which way the political wind is blowing. It is policy on the run and, as usual, it demonstrates no empathy for the circumstances of Queenslanders in regional and rural areas of the state.

Water conservation is important. No-one is debating that that is not the case. It is a precious resource. However, this arbitrary application of legislation that will require the development of outdoor water use conservation plans in areas where it is clearly not needed is just ridiculous. My communities and the councils which deliver water in these communities should not be burdened with more red tape from this state government.

The bill will amend the section of the Water Act to provide for a process to deal with applications to change a water allocation. This amendment will give the chief executive officer of the Department of Natural Resources and Water the flexibility to elect to put in place a specific process to deal with applications in these circumstances. This amendment is proposed to assist water users to better identify the issues that they will need to address before an application for a change in water allocation can be considered. It is suggesting that the amendment will also significantly cut the costs of making an application and reduce departmental resources necessary to process the application as elements of these applications will have been pre-assessed. I welcome any process that may expedite the consideration by the department of water licences or water allocations, because at the moment anecdotal reports from individual landowners are that the waiting periods involved are ridiculous.

With those concerns on the record, I acknowledge also the issues raised by my colleagues from the Queensland coalition with respect to some of the more poorly conceived parts of these two bills. This state Labor government is in a panic and it is clear from the desperate nature of the provisions in these bills that it has been asleep at the wheel for almost two decades as far as water infrastructure in Queensland is concerned.