



Speech by

Andrew Cripps

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

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WATER RESOURCE (BARRON) AMENDMENT PLAN (NO. 1): DISALLOWANCE

Mr CRIPPS (Hinchinbrook—LNP) (8.16 pm): I rise to support the disallowance motion moved by the member for Callide and seconded by the member for Dalrymple in relation to the Water Resource (Barron) Amendment Plan. I had some contact with the development of WRPs during my time as the shadow minister for natural resources and water before the last election and more recently in my electorate with the commencement of the Wet Tropics WRP in Far North Queensland. Water resource plans are not new. For over a decade WRPs have been commencing in various catchment areas across Queensland, but few have been progressed without difficulties and without controversies. For example, yesterday the Minister for Natural Resources introduced a bill to amend the Water Act that includes provisions to finalise the Condamine-Balonne resource operations plan, and that is the WRP for the Condamine-Balonne catchments. As the minister said yesterday, finalising the Condamine-Balonne WRP was delayed in 2008 because the draft plan was contested in the courts.

The Condamine-Balonne WRP took more than a decade to develop and finalise, and this is partly due to the complex nature of water entitlements in that area but also relates to the actions of the department in this process whereby the local knowledge and experience of landowners has not been given due regard, and it should have been given that due regard in the first instance. Those with the most experience had to fight hard to have their intimate knowledge of the catchment recognised and accepted by the department, and there remains a degree of dissatisfaction with the end result. Unfortunately, the story is similar in respect of the Barron WRP. The Barron WRP commenced in 2002, so it is only being finalised eight years later—yet another example of this process being a long and drawn out episode during which the security of water entitlement holders is in limbo. That seriously affects investment in industry and economic growth in the region—in this case, in Far North Queensland.

So what is the gripe being put forward by the landowners in the Barron WRP which the LNP is supporting and giving voice to on their behalf tonight in the form of this disallowance motion? The issue is not the conversion of area based irrigation entitlements to volumetric entitlements in areas C or H in the proposed plan. The issue is not the condition to limit the take in the annual allocation of two-thirds between July and December each year, nor is the gripe related to the proposal to develop a system of tradeable water allocations in certain areas above the Tinaroo Falls Dam. In fact, they support the extension of that system to other areas above the dam.

So there should be no attempt by the state Labor government, as we heard from the member for Barron River, to suggest that water entitlement holders in the Barron WRP are completely opposed to the development of this WRP, because that is not true. These landowners are reliant on the ongoing sustainable supply of water within the Barron catchment. They know that and they understand that. The water entitlement holders are objecting to—justifiably in my view—the proposal to prohibit an increase in the take of groundwater from area B in the Barron WRP.

The department of natural resources and water, as it was at the time, asserted that water resources were effectively too scarce to accept any further applications for additional water entitlements in area B of

the Barron WRP. The then DNRW relied on the views of its preferred experts. Once again, the department had little regard for the local knowledge and local experience of landowners within the Barron WRP area. There are other well-credentialed technical professionals who have put forward different views about the sustainable availability of water resources in area B. These reports have been made available to the DNRW—now DERM—but have been ignored. This lack of accountability and transparency understandably frustrated many landowners within the Barron WRP.

As occurred in other catchment areas, legal proceedings were resorted to by some who felt particularly hard done by. Those individuals who choose that option have to have the financial means with which to pursue a court action. This is not the case for everyone in these circumstances. If they do not have the means, they are disadvantaged in that regard and they are run over by a department that does not listen.

Let me draw to the attention of the House some very interesting details indeed about how unreasonable DERM is being in not taking on board the local knowledge and experience of the landowners and the qualified technical experts who have alternative views to those of the department. Currently, the total existing annual amount of water allocations above Tinaroo Dam, which includes area B, is approximately 43,000 megalitres per year. If you consult the draft Barron resource operations plan document from 2005, you can see that SunWater—the state government owned water manager in this catchment—makes an annual allocation in area D of the Barron WRP of about 45,000 megalitres to something called distribution loss. What is distribution loss, members may ask if they are not familiar with the WRP for the Barron? It is the loss of water through SunWater's leaky pipes, leaky irrigation channels, irrigation channels that overflow and the loss of water through supplying water to SunWater customers via natural watercourses, where up to 80 per cent of the volume of water originally released by SunWater fails to reach the intended customer.

It is very interesting to note that the amount of water allocated each year to be lost completely by SunWater through these so-called distribution losses as a result of inadequate infrastructure, failing infrastructure, or the fact that SunWater is obliged to deliver water to some customers to whom it has no infrastructure, is approximately 2,000 megalitres a year more than the total annual amount of water allocated above Tinaroo Dam, which includes area B. This is an extraordinary statistic. Each year, SunWater plans to lose more water through inefficiencies and inadequacies in its own infrastructure than is allocated above the dam in the Barron WRP, which, as I mentioned earlier, includes area B that is the subject of the objection of the local landowners.

Given that SunWater is a state government owned entity, this is an embarrassing reflection on the incompetence of this government and DERM to manage water resources in this catchment. What is the state government doing with the dividends that it receives from SunWater? It is simply the case that this money hungry, stone motherless broke, debt ridden government is taking such a high level of dividends from SunWater that it does not have enough capital left over to reinvest in its infrastructure. For a government that holds itself up to be focused on sustainability issues, it is an extraordinary indictment to say that distribution loss can account for such a massive amount of water every year. It is a glaring hole in the government's credibility—at least as far as water resource management is concerned—and as a result the landowners in the Barron are being unfairly disadvantaged.

It is not as though it would cost an extraordinary amount of money for these inefficiencies and inadequacies to be dealt with. The leaky pipes and irrigation channels should certainly be able to be addressed without too much demand on SunWater. It should be the responsibility of SunWater to maintain its assets. The result would be water savings that could be made available to landowners in area B of the Barron WRP who have had their applications for additional allocations rejected since 2004. This is not an unreasonable claim, especially when you consider that the total volume of applications made to DERM for additional allocations in area B of the Barron WRP is only in the order of 14,000 megalitres.

So in other words, if SunWater could reduce its annual allocation of water resources to be lost completely due to the inefficiencies and inadequacies of its own infrastructure in area D from 45,000 megalitres to 31,000 megalitres, DERM could grant all of the applications for additional water allocations lodged by landowners in area B of the Barron WRP. So that is not unreasonable. The government would have to improve its efficiency by one-third to grant all of the extra applications in area B.

That is why the LNP is pleased to stand up today for the landowners within the Barron WRP who are being disadvantaged. This issue is important for industries in North Queensland. I am very pleased to support the member for Callide and the member for Dalrymple in this regard because this is a familiar story of DERM failing to listen to local landowners and stakeholders with local knowledge and experience. It is an all-too-familiar one that we are repeating again and again. It does not matter if you are talking about the Condamine-Balonne WRP, or if you are talking about the Barron WRP, or if you are talking about the Wet Tropics WRP, which has just started in Far North Queensland, DERM does not listen to locals who have the knowledge and experience of the catchment in which these plans are developed. I am very pleased to say that I was happy to hear the member for Callide say that there was a day of reckoning coming when DERM will have to rely on good science and not politics. I support the motion.