




Speech by

Jann Stuckey

MEMBER FOR CURRUMBIN

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REVENUE AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mrs STUCKEY** (Currumbin—LNP) (4.50 pm): I rise to join the debate on the Revenue and Other Legislation Amendment Bill, which was introduced into the House on 22 March, at the last sitting of parliament, by the Treasurer and Minister for State Development and Trade, the honourable member for Mount Coot-tha. I commend the honourable member for Clayfield and shadow Treasurer for his creditable effort in articulating the LNP's stance in regard to this bill. My colleague rattled a few cages, judging by the reactions of Labor members worried they will lose their seats at the next state election, whenever that might be.

The primary objective of this bill supposedly is to amend Queensland's revenue legislation to maintain its currency and ensure its proper operation. To this effect, the omnibus bill seeks to amend or repeal some 25 acts. In effect, amendments are being made to a significant list of important issues that affect all corners of our great state, including the South-East Queensland water restructure through the merger of WaterSecure and Seqwater, the extension of urban water reform to outside South-East Queensland, changes to the Local Government Act and City of Brisbane Act, changes to the legislation governing Cape York parks, Sustainable Planning Act reforms and Duties Act changes covering disabled motor vehicle use.

As the currency of the water issue prevails in my area, I shall limit my contribution to the amendments relating to the South East Queensland Water (Restructuring) Act 2007. The bill will amend parts of that act to introduce a statutory mechanism enabling the transfer of assets, liabilities, instruments and employees to facilitate the proposed merger of the Queensland Manufactured Water Authority, WaterSecure, and the Queensland Bulk Water Supply Authority, Seqwater, as well as future transfers of bulk water assets and associated liabilities from the government owned special-purpose vehicle construction companies to the bulk water authorities. The bill will incorporate transitional provisions for the proposed merger of Seqwater and WaterSecure, including a statutory exemption from transfer duty on the transaction and provisions confirming the protection of rights and entitlements of transferring employees. The bill will allow for the dissolution of WaterSecure upon the transfer of its assets, liabilities and employees and will remove the existing restriction on the number of directors that may be appointed to a board under the act. Currently, five members, including the chair, may be appointed. The merger of Seqwater and WaterSecure, which was announced by the government in late 2010, is to take effect from 1 July 2011.

As any Gold Coast member would know, dissatisfaction with the Beattie-Bligh governments' expensive water reforms has reached boiling point. I wish to add my voice to that of the half a million or so Gold Coasters who feel the state government is gouging their weekly wages and making it increasingly difficult for them to make ends meet. People on the Gold Coast are hurting. They are hurting as I have not seen in my 24 years as a Currumbin resident. More and more people are finding cost-of-living pressures unavoidable and in some cases unbearable. In fact, spiking living costs caused by a hike in fees from basic services such as water and electricity rated as the highest concern by far on a recent electorate-wide

survey I conducted. The usual No. 1 item of concern, law and order, was beaten, as were other high priorities relating to health and transport.

This is the sixth piece of water legislation to come before the House in as many years. It is no wonder electorates across the Gold Coast are furious. Every time this government amends legislation that has anything to do with restructuring water supplies in some way prices soar and innocent people suffer. In truth, Queenslanders are paying through the nose to repay the billions of dollars of debt incurred by the Beattie and Bligh governments. The honourable member for Callide described water reform as 'convoluted and complex bureaucracy' that has allowed wickedly high salaries for Allconnex executives, not to mention the cost of their large rented floor space in central Robina.

In 2007, legislation debated in this House established the four statutory authorities to own and operate the South-East Queensland water grid: Seqwater, WaterSecure, LinkWater and the SEQ Water Grid Manager. In speaking to this legislation in November 2007 I stated—

I do not want to see Gold Coast residents disadvantaged as a result of this state government takeover of these water assets, and I would hope every member on the Gold Coast will feel the same way.

In 2009, legislation was introduced to establish the controversial distributor-retailer water entities and the three council owned entities, Queensland Urban Utilities for Brisbane, Ipswich, Somerset, Lockyer Valley and the Scenic Rim; Unitywater covering the Sunshine Coast and Moreton Bay areas; and Allconnex covering the Gold Coast, Redland City and Logan. In speaking to that legislation in October 2009, in relation to anticipated price rises I stated—

We can therefore presume, just as was the case with the soaring electricity bills, that the price increase for water will be much greater than the government is letting on.

Unfortunately, those predictions have already become reality. There is no relief in sight for taxpayers under this incompetent Bligh Labor government and certainly it will not come from the state government's revised water operating strategy. In late 2010, the *Sunday Mail* announced—or should I say 'leaked'—that revised strategy, which included the option of shutting down the Tugun desalination plant, resulting in a \$5—I repeat, \$5—annual saving on household water bills. One reader of the *Courier-Mail* described that forecast as 'an unmitigated insult' to struggling Queenslanders, and that is especially so for people in my electorate.

In January this year, when Gold Coasters gingerly opened their water bills, they were shocked and upset, to say the least, at the figures that faced them. Increases of up to 20 per cent and beyond were seen across the city. Pensioners, retirees, single parents, ordinary families and our much admired community groups and clubs were all hit hard by the price jump. So fierce was the outrage felt by residents against water retailer Allconnex, the council and the state government that little else filled the papers, radio and nightly news broadcasts for weeks. Protests have erupted all over the Gold Coast in anger over these council owned, state government implemented water reforms.

Starting as a Facebook group, the Disconex Allconnex movement, led by organiser Kirsty Strowger, has captivated our city. Not surprisingly, support for the protest group is growing by the day. I have now attended two protest rallies and a march organised by Disconex Allconnex which have brought together hundreds of people and attracted thousands of signatures on petitions. Several LNP members were in attendance but not a single Labor member. It is a bit rich for the member for Burleigh to criticise Campbell Newman's comments when he visited the Gold Coast last weekend, when she and her comrades from Labor do not even attend a single protest rally. What have the members for Burleigh, Southport or Albert done to support their constituents and community groups facing crippling water bills? Nothing—absolutely nothing! I wonder if they will respond to the following email being circulated en masse to all members of parliament and bombarding their inboxes as mine was overnight. No fewer than 35 emails came through. It states—

Dear MP.

Since you are a responsible MP elected by your constituents to represent us in Government, I write to you as a concerned resident and request you to state your position on the following matter:

This communication regards the SEQ water reform which directly affects all residents now and in the future. It is of major concern to everybody that the fundamental rights for all residents in Queensland to have access to clean and abundant water at an affordable cost to every person has been effectively removed, in what could be argued as being an unjust and unconstitutional order under the direction of the former Premier Beattie government.

The letter writer continues—

What is your position on this water reform removing the rights of citizens to influence the price of water and waste water as well as the direction of infrastructure planning? Are you For or Against? Do you believe it appropriate that a 62.5% shareholder should be dictated to by the minority shareholders? Will you support changes that ensure "community ability to pay" as a fundamental to water

charging as Councils always did? If you are against this unconstitutional reform, what do you intend doing to help revert this decision and have the water returned back to Local Council/s that efficiently managed Water prior to the changes being enforced.

The writer continues—

The result of the NSW election is now a clear indication the voting public will no longer tolerate the indifference showed by their current Government. Forget whether the existing Government is Labor or Conservative. It is clear the voters in NSW had no confidence and that lack of confidence is evident here in Queensland today. As the Queensland elections loom closer I want to know who deserves my vote to represent my interest and what they are actively doing for me now. I don't want promises or spin as we know once the elections are over, promises and spin can be revoked with the flick of a pen.

The writer closes with—

Your prompt reply to this letter will be appreciated. Your lack of reply to this letter will leave me in no doubt as to your position on the matter and will be noted at election time. Should you reply with the "spin" that Council's are profiteering then I will take it that you have no interest in our plight nor in the overwhelming public opinion that the current structure is undemocratic, unaccountable and lacks community focus.

That is the end of the letter. It is time that the government and its members, especially those on the Gold Coast, owned up to some responsibility. I will read into the record the explanatory notes—

In late 2010, the Government announced a revised operating strategy for the manufactured water assets to reflect the substantial improvement in water security in SEQ.

In other words, Mother Nature saved this government's bacon from an almighty thrashing at the ballot box. It will take more than Mother Nature to save the government from the wrath of the people at the forthcoming poll, after \$7 billion of their taxpayer dollars were spent on this perplexing 'water security' plan, the SEQ Water Grid, and the associated water reforms in the south-east.

This bill contains provisions to facilitate the dissolution of WaterSecure, the manufactured water authority established to oversee the Gold Coast desalination project and the western corridor recycled water scheme. Given the controversy surrounding the short life span of these two money guzzlers, it is no wonder the state government wants to rid itself of the manufactured water brand.

On 1 October 2010 the state government officially commissioned and took over control of the Gold Coast desalination plant at Tugun in my electorate. Only then, after four years of drama and catastrophe, did the state government consider the plant up to standard. A continuous stream of faults delayed deadlines for the commissioning of the plant, first in November 2008 and then January 2009 and again in June 2010. Had the rains not come and Queensland's worst drought persisted, the government would have failed completely to secure a drinking water supply for its South-East Queensland residents as the plant was not ready in time. Now we are told that the plant is to be placed on standby—a hot standby, if you please. This facility has had more episodes than *Days of our Lives*. Apart from its numerous faults and defects, it has also supposedly run at full capacity for questionable periods of time—that is, when it was not mothballed for repairs. These terms are not clearly understood by residents who just want to know that this monster of a building and pipes that were imposed upon them will be able to do the job they were built to do with parts that will last the 50 or more years they are supposed to.

I do ask the Treasurer if he would inform the House what happens to the obligations and agreements relating to the Tugun desalination plant under this new legislation? How many jobs will be lost while this occurs? Does the Treasurer or his government plan to crank it up again in the near future? Is this the most cost-effective method of maintaining this plant? I do hope that the Treasurer will take these things on board because it would appear he is not listening to me right now. While we continue to hear the decision to place—

Government members interjected.

Mrs STUCKEY: I just asked the Treasurer some questions and my electorate is deserving of receiving some answers. A simple nod that he has heard me would be very much appreciated.

While we continue to hear the decision to place the plant on hot standby is expected to save taxpayers \$10.5 million a year, the government has been less than forthcoming as to what this process actually entails, exactly how much it will cost and how this will affect the longevity of the plant. After all that the people in the Currumbin electorate have been through, surely it is not too much to ask for some answers.

As my colleagues have acknowledged, this bill seeks to correct this complex and convoluted, not to mention expensive, bureaucracy by merging two of the water authorities. It is a small step in the right direction but it will not have enough impact to fix the massive problem created by this toxic Labor government.