



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

BILLS

**Environment Protection and Biodiversity
Conservation Amendment (Independent Expert
Scientific Committee on Coal Seam Gas and
Large Coal Mining Development) Bill 2012**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Tuesday, 29 May 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Katter, Bob, MP

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Mr KATTER (Kennedy) (17:03): I respect the previous speaker, but doesn't he realise that his party stands for the exact opposite position of all of the moral issues that he raised in his speech? I feel as though I am in a lunatic asylum insofar as the cutbacks in the Murray-Darling are going to reduce a lot of his towns to ghost towns. They were little tiny towns of 300 or 400 people before the irrigation came through. You are going to take eight million megalitres of irrigation and reduce it to five million megalitres. I fear for what is going to happen in inland New South Wales. I went there, and it is very relevant to the coal seam gas issue because the contamination of the underground aquifers is very real.

I think that I am the only person in this place who has ever worked down mines. I worked my own mines. I put my own gelignite at the coalface, blew it up, and mucked out with a shovel. The thing was in the development phase, and you can afford to do that sort of thing in the development phase. I was floating my own mining company before I went sideways into other things. But I worked at the Mount Isa Mines as a labourer at the coalface. I would also like to think that my scientific knowledge is reasonably adequate.

If you release hydrogen sulfide or methane gases, when they mix with water, they become poisonous. I spent half my life looking for copper sulfate. When you are looking for a copper ore body, you look for the ore that is below the watertable. That is invariably sulfides, and copper sulfate is a poison. Every copper ore body in the world is a copper sulfate ore body. There are one or two exceptions, but I think it is a fair call. The watertables that they sit in by definition are contaminants. They are mild acids.

I love to promote my book! People do not know about their own country. Inside the Great Dividing Range there were no kangaroos—there were no Skippys—there were no goannas and there were no people, because there was no surface water. In my homeland in the mid-west of North Queensland, west of Boulia, which is almost on the Northern Territory border, there was a stream that ran for 80 kilometres: Spring Creek. The Great Artesian Basin surfaced there. We dug holes in the ground and took the water out east of Boulia, between Boulia and the Great Dividing Range. So we now have maybe 10,000 or 20,000 kilometres of waterways in that area between the Great Dividing Range and the Northern Territory border. We now do not have an 80-kilometre river out there. It was not much use because it did not rain much and there was nothing much living out there. But when we put that water back this way, where there was rainfall and beautiful soils, we had this highly prolific grazing area which grazed a lot of Australia's sheep and was the biggest grazing area for cattle in the country. But what happens if that aquifer is contaminated? And they are drilling through it as we speak. Let me explain this to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, because I am probably the only person here who understands this. When you drill down and hit hydrogen sulfate, methane or any of these gases they come up the pipe. There is sheathing when you drill. There might be a bit of contamination. You put bore casing down—whether it be plastic or metal—and it prevents that contamination from getting into the aquifers. They are drilling through the Great Artesian Basin now. It costs a lot of money to drill. These holes cost \$2,000 a foot. They would not be doing it without knowing that the methane and other gases are there to access. Righto, it is protected when the sheath is there. But anyone in mining knows that the ground moves—and I am not talking about tectonic plate shifts. When the ground moves, it will wear out or buckle those plastic or metal sheaths. If you have got hydrogen sulfate coming up, then you have got acids coming up. If you have got any sorts of sulfates, you will have acids. No matter what metal the sheath is made of, it will be worn away. If it is made of plastic it will buckle and eventually wear out. So at some stage you are going to contaminate the aquifer.

You might say, 'What's a couple of holes?' Well, in Queensland there are 55,000 applications so far. God gave a wonderful resource to our country. This was a land that no-one wanted. The Portuguese knew about it in 1504 when they were in Timor, and, in 1624, Carstensz wrote a full report about it to the government of Batavia. But it was such a dry, hungry country that no-one wanted to come here. Even when they did come here, all they sent for the first seven years were convicts. The only reason anyone came here was that they found some gold here. Up until 1900, that was the only reason anyone came here.

But when we were drilling for gold and other things, we discovered this underground water supply called the Great Artesian Basin. Without that supply, there would be no cattle or sheep inland from the Great Dividing Range. We would lose it all. Our inland rivers are so inconsistent that we cannot rely upon them to supply water for our stock. So what is now a great resource that feeds maybe 15 million or 20 million people—from the cattle and sheep that come of that area—will be feeding nobody. We will have destroyed that great resource the good Lord has given us. God will say: 'I gave you this resource. What did you do with it?'

The previous speaker spoke about the Prime Minister saying we want to be the food bowl of Asia. I mean, I wish someone would get their feet on the ground here! We will be importing tomatoes from China. Do not talk to me about it. Go and talk to Frank Costa, the biggest seller of fruit and vegetables in Australia. He owns the Essendon Football Club, amongst other things. Go and talk to him. We will be importing tomatoes from China. We import prawns from China. We import seafood from China. We are importing apples from China. We are not going to be the food bowl of Asia; we will be a net importer of food from Asia. But do not listen to me. Go down to the library and get the statistics out.

But how are we husbanding those resources? We had six million hectares of the most beautiful land on earth. You can farm it for seven years and not use any fertilisers. We had a research place at Richmond for about 15 years. For seven years they farmed it. In the final year they had no results whatsoever from putting fertiliser on it. That is how rich this soil is. So what are we doing? Six million hectares has been taken over by the dirty, filthy prickly tree, which was introduced by us. Human beings introduced the prickly tree and it has destroyed everything. The little dunnart—a cute little fella that is like a mini-kangaroo—is doomed because it cannot survive the prickly tree.

Instead of going forward and irrigating on the banks of our rivers to protect them and build them up and stop these terrible seeds from getting away every time there is a flood and being carried out and out and out, we have done absolutely nothing. Our banks are eroding away into the Gulf of Carpentaria—and now we are drilling holes through the greatest asset this nation has! The greatest asset this nation has is not coal. Coal will run out in 30 or 40 years and there will be replacements for it. The greatest asset this nation has is not iron ore. Iron ore will run out in 30 or 40 years and other countries will be producing it anyway so it will not be worth a great deal. The greatest asset this nation has is the artesian aquifer. But nobody is saying, 'Stop, you're not to drill a hole through the artesian aquifer.'

I am the only one here with the experience to know that, if you drill a hole through there, you will pick up poisonous gases all the time. Methane, hydrogen sulfate and all these poisonous gases come up. As long as the plastic sheath, the bore casing, is there it is all right. But the bore casing is not there forever. I mean, nothing is forever anywhere. All the great buildings of the world are ruins today—the Parthenon, the Colosseum and the pyramids. All great buildings wear out eventually. We are dooming and condemning this area and putting it in question. What for? Where is the benefit to this nation?

The previous speaker said that there had been a benefit in the member for Maranoa's area. It is like a sugar fix: you get a lot of energy at the start of the game. But I would not want to be the coach. If your State of Origin team have a sugar hit, they will play terrifically in the first 10 minutes but there will not be much left in the tank for the next 30 or 40 minutes—that is for certain. And that is what is happening here. I have lived with four generations of my family—and, if you include my kids and grandkids, seven generations—in the mining fields of Australia. The Katter side of my family went to these towns before there were towns there. And on the other side of my family they perished chasing gold in the deserts.

Is mining a huge boon to a town? As I get older I wonder about the benefit of that. We have a huge shift, we leap forward and then we have terrible withdrawal symptoms afterwards. What happens afterwards is absolutely critical. Charters Towers was a bigger town than Brisbane. It did not just come down to a normal sized town; it was vanishing completely. A few things happened and we were able to arrest that decline, but the things that we did to arrest the decline vanished because we found gold. Everyone left the meatworks, to quote but one example, or left the railway to go and work in the goldmines. The gold has now run out and I have a town where 10,000 people have lost their jobs and we are in a very critical state. If we had not had the gold we would have been determined to keep open the meatworks and the hospital, and all of the other things we had. But we did not care much about that because we had this quick fix—a quick hit. As the previous speaker, the member for Riverina, referred to, it will not be there in the longer term, but the aquifers have to be there.

I am all for drilling before you mine coal. The Americans did this. I speak with great authority. As the Minister for Mines and Energy—and, more importantly, as the minister for northern development—in the Queensland government, I heavily researched coal seam gas back in the eighties. Then it was not profitable, although there will be those that argue about that.

The Americans extracted coal seam gas to make their mining safe—they heavily subsidised it—ahead of the mining, so that the dangers of mining were removed. And most of the coal seam gas in America really comes from that phenomenon of mining. I am all for doing that. If there are no aquifers I find it hard to say that we should not be extracting coal seam gas, but the minute there are aquifers, as the member for Riverina pointed out, the water that comes up is contaminated. Then you have to spread it out somewhere to get rid of it. It is all flat country; you cannot put it in a big hole somewhere, so it is a huge area that becomes contaminated.

Heather Brown, a wonderful Australian and one of our great fighters on this issue, pointed out that in her area there is going to be a huge bowl of dirty, filthy, contaminating, poisonous soup. She went there because this was a beautiful place to live and she was suddenly confronted. The neighbours—his father is one of my three best friends; we went around a lot of the country and the never-never—are in a situation where there is an authority over their land to prospect for coal and for coal seam gas. They cannot go forward. They cannot do anything with it because the banks will not lend any money because they do not know when a mine will open up there. And the miners will not tell them; they said it would be seven years before they make a decision. So the neighbours' lives are destroyed. They cannot sell the land; no-one is going to buy it with authorities to prospect or exploration permits over it.

I do not want to condemn people or speak badly about people but you cannot get up in this place and speak on behalf of the opposition when you know they have done absolutely nothing and when the incoming Premier in Queensland is in love with coal seam gas. There are 55,000 holes; he is going to put 200,000 holes down. He is in love with it. So do not come in here and say these things, because your party represents the exact opposite view— *(Time expired)*