

HANSARD

House of Representatives

28 October 2009

Mr SULLIVAN (Longman) (5:59 PM) —I am pleased to rise to take note of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Climate Change, Water, Environment and the Arts. In doing so, I commend the chair, Jennie George MP; the deputy chair, Dr Mal Washer MP; and the members of that committee that has brought to us such a substantial and worthwhile report. I have to admit from the start that I have had the opportunity only to make a first reading of this report, but I felt it was important that I come into the chamber and make some comments on behalf of my local community. I also acknowledge the great work of the committee secretariat, which has supported them in building this report.

The electorate of Longman, which I have the honour and pleasure to represent in this parliament, contains a number of coastal villages. In particular I would like to mention the Pumicestone Passage villages of Toorbul, Donnybrook and Meldale. It also contains the bayside villages of Godwin Beach, Deception Bay and Beachmere. It also contains Bribie Island. The report points out that there are 711,000 dwellings within a three-kilometre range of the coastline less than six metres above sea level and that these are potentially threatened. On Bribie Island, where I live, there is nowhere more than three kilometres from the shoreline or greater than six metres above sea level, so my entire community of 20,000-plus people, not to mention some very nice national parks, is under threat from the effects of global warming and rising ocean levels.

The report does not go overboard. It indicates quite modest sea level rises, in my view. However, what it also does is suggest that the sea level rises of themselves are not the main problem. It suggests that it is the more frequent and more severe weather events that are going to create a great deal of the problem for people in those properties. The truth of the matter is that on Bribie Island an occasional king tide will break the seawall on Pumicestone Passage and put salt water on our roadways. We have been able to recognise, from the beginning of my association with the island some quarter of a century ago, beach erosion as a consequence of wild storms. There is regular pumping of replenishment sand from Moreton Bay onto the foreshore to shore it up, and at the moment there is concern—though it has probably died down a little—that Bribie Island itself will break through to Pumicestone Passage to the north, near Caloundra. That is something that the community in Caloundra—particularly in that part of Caloundra—are very concerned about. These things become a little more certain if the scenario that is suggested in this plan, as I read it, comes to fruition.

The other thing that I think would be very interesting for people in my state to understand is that this report indicates that Queensland is going to take a disproportionate amount of the hit from a rising sea level. Of those 711,000 properties that I mentioned earlier, it is supposed that one-quarter of a million of those are in Queensland. This, of course, interested me; the report having been released and questions having been answered on it in parliament yesterday, I was able to pick up a Melbourne paper today and see an article in that paper suggesting what areas are potentially going to be worst affected and to open my local

newspaper and find not a word. We are the state that is going to be worst affected, and the paper is ignoring the issue.

If I can coin a phrase from a former administration, this is something about which we need to be alert and alarmed. This is a report that suggests that our whole way of life is under some threat. I was pleased to see that the committee in its deliberations had discussed plans that might be useful and there was some suggestion by the Queensland government and by the Planning Institute of Australia that the South-East Queensland Regional Plan would be a good model for the governments to follow in planning for the future. Praising the Queensland government's SEQ Regional Plan, the Planning Institute of Australia highlighted its socioeconomic and environmental inclusions, and I think that as we approach what may be the outcomes of these events we need to be sure that we take the socioeconomic and environmental considerations into account in order to make long-term plans for the region.

A great many of the people who are moving to Queensland and are putting pressure on Queensland's infrastructure are settling in the south-east corner. As a resident of that part of the state I have to say it is probably the best place in Australia to live and we welcome them there and look forward to them continuing to come in sufficient numbers for us to have a sustainable, viable and ongoing community.

As part of its work the committee identified key challenges. These key challenges are not new to anybody, but to my knowledge they have never been codified in this fashion before. Importantly, the first of those key challenges is involvement by the national government. One of the things that I find to some degree frustrating in talking with my constituents is the level to which the federal government is disempowered by the national Constitution. The Constitution sets out—I think in section 51—what the powers of the federal government are and it makes it very plain that all other powers will remain with the colonies, or the states as they became. On a daily basis a constituent will indicate to me that they believe the federal government has the power to stop a state government doing anything the state government might propose to do that the constituent does not like, and that is not the case.

Similarly, with coastal management there are huge limitations on what the federal government is able to do. The important thing is that we need to create an intergovernmental role here, and the first point that the committee has identified is the involvement by the national government. On page 287 of the report in paragraph 6.129 our Queensland state government has provided what the committee has referred to as a useful outline on what the national government's leadership in coastal zone management could be. It is the sort of role that my constituents believe the federal government should play:

- Lead the development of regional scale climate change projections ...;
- Lead the development of a set of nationally consistent default climate change scenarios ...;
- Coordinate and provide financial assistance ...;
- Lead the development of nationally consistent methodologies for assessing climate change risk ...;
- Collaborate and provide financial support for States ...

These are issues that are truly the province of a leadership role and federal government leadership in this matter is important.

I noted today that in question time, in response to a question as to what the government's response would be to this report, the Prime Minister gave an indication that the government was trying to take, essentially, an audit of coastal risk before responding to this report. The reality is that there are risks and we need to be concerned about those risks, particularly if we have substantial coastal involvement. As a local member I have that in my electorate as would a number of other MPs. I have a substantial area of the coastline of South-East Queensland in my electorate and this sort of report tells me that the people I represent need to be mindful of what is occurring. For example, one particular suburb, Banksia Beach, has an upmarket development—I will express it in those terms—where people are investing serious money in buying canal-side houses, large houses, and they are under some threat.

When we first moved to Bribie Island, my wife and I met a fellow in one of the local bowling clubs who, with the encouragement of half a dozen beers, jocularly suggested that Bribie Island had been put in place by a cyclone and that one day a cyclone would take it away. We built there anyway and the reality is that he may have been right. If we think about the fact that Bribie Island is less than six metres above sea level and if we think about the fact that there are already an increasing number of severe weather events, and it is severe weather events this report suggests are the problem as I read it on my first reading, then Bribie Island is at some risk. Cyclones may come south again. It is a long time since there has been a cyclone that far south in Queensland but severe weather events are the risk and that is what we can look forward to.

In closing, I congratulate the members of the committee, who I believe have done a particularly good job. They have delivered a report which, on my first reading and with the knowledge that I have which is not extensive enough to be called scientific knowledge, but the report is sound. It is a report that I will now be taking back to my community and suggesting to them that we need to be very mindful of what is going on. As much as anything else, in communities like mine, this report actually underlines in bold the fact that in this country we do need to get our carbon pollution reduction scheme legislation through this parliament and off to the conference in Copenhagen so that the world, not just Australia, can get on with the process of trying to correct the damage that we have done over hundreds of years to our environment. One young lady wore on her T-shirt, although talking about nuclear power at the time, a slogan saying that when she grew up she wanted the world to be here. We want the world to be here for our kids and climate change and the effects of climate change are the biggest threats to that. I commend the report.