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New South Wales Parliament Legislative Assembly

Environmental Planning and Assessment Amendment (Sydney Drinking Water Catchment) Bill 2017

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I speak in debate on the Government's hastily drafted patch-job legislation, the Environmental Planning and Assessment Amendment (Sydney Drinking Water Catchment) Bill 2017. Earlier today I read a story in the Sydney Morning Herald which outlined the absolute lack of legislative activity by the Berejiklian Liberal Government. It struck a chord because so many weeks in this place have been wasted by this Government and we have deliberated on such an insignificant volume of legislation.

The legislative output of this Chamber ground to a halt when Mike Baird pulled the pin. Often when legislation makes its way to the Assembly, it is legislation of this type—a quick fix to a long-festering problem that should have been dealt with earlier and more effectively.

The Premier prides herself on her managerial skills and business-like leadership, but as a matter of routine she sits on her hands for far too long and is prompted to act only because of some looming catastrophe or calamity. That is a terrible way to govern the State; yet that is the habit that the Premier has formed.

Without a special bill being introduced in this place there is a risk that during the looming summer the lights will go out in parts of New South Wales. That is because this Premier, the great manager, has done nothing to secure the energy supply needed by this State.

It is tired and boring parliamentary theatre to see a Liberal Minister for Resources and Energy brandishing a lump of coal during question time. This is rank political me-tooism of the most depressing kind. The member for Lane Cove is no Scott Morrison and he should come up with his own original stunts rather than stealing the lame ideas of his Federal counterparts.

But here we are: We have the Minister for coal.

But I digress. We have before us legislation that seeks to resolve a problem entirely of the Government's own making. In the six years—six long years—of this Government, there has been no investment whatsoever in publicly owned renewable energy generation. That is to the shame of the Liberals and Nationals.

We have a government that apparently acknowledges the realities of climate change, but refuses to do anything about it.

The NSW Renewable Energy Action Plan is depressing reading. Far from being a plan for renewable energy, it is a short list of neoliberal distractions and justifications for inaction.

It lists some goals. Firstly, attract renewable energy investment; that is code for "Don't actually invest any money in renewables".

Secondly, build community support. I can give you a tip, Premier Berejiklian: the community supports renewable energy. They have done so for many years and they are fed up to the back teeth with this Government's inaction and they are fed up with childish displays from Liberal politicians with their lumps of coal in question time.

Thirdly, attract and grow renewable energy expertise. Again, no real money is attached to this; it is just a motherhood statement.

There we have the Government's plan for a renewable energy future. There is no money for publicly funded renewable energy generation and a redundant public relations campaign for something everyone seems to support except for the Liberals and Nationals. It is, therefore, absolutely unsurprising that we find ourselves here today with a bill such as the one before us.

I foreshadow at this stage that I will be moving amendments to the bill, which have been circulated.

Labor is seeking to amend this bill because we see this issue in two parts. In the first place, we have a short-term problem and a long-term one. The short-term problem is that without this bill, we will reach summer without enough energy generation capacity to meet the needs of the State and we will have power blackouts.

The long-term issue is that the State needs to pivot away from coal-fired power generation altogether, and a responsible, diligent government would engage with that issue and make headway on preparing for a clean energy future.

A diligent and competent government would make preparations for a clean energy future not only because of the very well understood and quantifiable perils of climate change but also because we must ensure workers and their families employed in the coal extraction and coal-fired power generation industries are assisted to transition to new jobs in the clean energy sector.

While Labor is rightly concerned about the short-term energy security of this State and we are absolutely aware of the need to ensure workers are given

real options and real opportunities in the medium to long term to reskill, retrain, and redeploy, we know that those workers should not be faced with the sack in the lead-up to Christmas.

Labor is absolutely committed to a clean energy future, as my colleagues, such as the member for Summer Hill, have outlined. That is why the amendments I will move will seek to remove the provisions in the Government's bill to extend de facto approval for other mines. We should not provide a blank cheque to the mining industry for planning approvals of this kind. On a case-by-case basis, mining companies should put forward their proposals and those proposals should be assessed in the usual way. In the meantime the Government should be investing in renewable energy generation and reducing the State's reliance on coal-fired energy generation. We should not weaken environmental protections and water quality protections at all mines simply because there is some short-term imperative, caused by Liberal Government inaction and indifference at Springvale-Mount Piper.

In the meantime, the New South Wales Coalition Government could learn a thing or two from its Labor counterparts in South Australia.

When faced with an immediate risk to the energy security of that State, Premier Jay Wetherill's Labor Government took decisive action to secure the State's energy and invest in renewable storage that will help the Government guarantee to citizens that the lights will stay on over summer.

This Government, on the other hand, has done nothing.

My Labor colleagues and I want to see public investment in renewable energy generation and storage. Having sold off the poles and wires network and raised billions of dollars, the New South Wales Government could have invested an unprecedented amount of money in solar and wind energy generation and begun investigating pumped-hydro storage or battery storage of the kind being invested in by the South Australians. Instead, using the money from the sell-off of our poles and wires, the Liberals are building a tunnel from the city to the Northern Beaches.

We find ourselves in a situation where, as a consequence of New South Wales' over-reliance on coal-fired power, we have to further commit ourselves to coal simply to keep the lights on in the short term. It is pathetic.

Labor is very unhappy at being wedged by the incompetence of the Berejiklian Government and will be moving amendments in my name, as I have indicated.

I want to dwell for a moment on the environmental impacts of this inaction and ineptitude. The Springvale and Clarence collieries, both operated by Centennial Coal, are at the edges of the Blue Mountains National Park. In separate incidents, the mining company has caused considerable damage to our pristine wilderness areas. At Clarence Colliery, a coal fines spill in July 2015 saw dozens of kilometres of the Wollangambe River polluted with fine coaldust fibres after the collapse of a mining wastewater dam. The collapse of the dam, located just 400

metres from the border of the World Heritage listed national park, was described at the Land and Environment Court as a "disaster waiting to happen". When I asked questions on notice of the Minister for Industry, Resources and Energy in November 2015 about what emergency response plans were in place at Clarence Colliery before the disaster, the Government could not say because it did not know.

It is unacceptable to me that this Government sees fit to stand back and let mining operators rip, without adequate oversight. I have been pursuing these matters relentlessly since my election in 2015. Therefore, I am very concerned about allowing Centennial Coal any leeway whatsoever, but as a consequence of the Premier's indifference and lack of leadership, and as a result of the Coalition's addiction to coalmining and coalmining company donations, we have a situation in which we are forced to act in this place to prevent the lights from going out and to prevent the ruining of a community of workers and their families—some of whom are constituents in my electorate. They have been given no support or assistance or even an opportunity to transition to new jobs in the emerging clean energy production and distribution sectors.

This bill is a very sad indictment of a very bad government. The people of New South Wales should take note today and look at the crisis this Government has created for itself.

They should remember the breathtaking incompetence of the New South Wales Government when the time comes to vote at the 2019 election.