

Chris Hartcher, currently Minister for Resources and Energy, gives a speech to the NSW Legislative Assembly on the threat of coal seam gas to the Central Coast while in opposition in 2005.

Mr CHRIS HARTCHER (Gosford) [4.41 p.m.]: This is a matter of great public importance to the State and to the people of the Central Coast. Last October I gave notice of a motion seeking an inquiry into activities related to gas exploration in the Yarramalong and Dooralong valleys. It is not without significance that the Government, though prepared to discuss the issue in the House by way of a matter of public importance, which cannot be amended or put to a vote, accordingly allows itself the luxury of claiming that the House has debated the matter while not allowing members of the House to discuss issues relating to the committee or to express their opinion by way of a formal vote.

That said, the importance of the gas industry is not disputed. Everyone in New South Wales and Australia knows that methane gas is a clean form of energy and one of the best means of complying with the Kyoto protocol. As the Minister said, New South Wales does not have a strong gas industry, which it needs. Balanced against that is the need of 300,000 people on the Central Coast to have access to safe, clean water—and that issue lies at the very heart of this debate. It is well-known that there are areas of gas other than in the Yarramalong and Dooralong valleys. It is just that these two areas are more accessible to markets in Sydney and Newcastle and by the existing gas pipeline that runs between Sydney and Newcastle.

However, the people of the Central Coast cannot be sacrificed on the altar of economic expediency. Their entitlement to clean, safe water must be paramount. Of enormous concern to those who look carefully at the Minister's speech is that, although the Minister listed all of the steps he has taken and how he has dealt quite exhaustively with the process, the issues critical to Central Coast water supplies have not been addressed. For example, the Minister dismissed scientific information supplied to him by the Australian Gas Alliance as "not the best available scientific evidence", but gave no justification for that statement. That scientific information was dismissed in a single sentence. The people of the Central Coast are entitled to more. Now we discover that on 28 April 2005 the Minister approved two additional wells, at Jilliby 9 and Jilliby 13.

It is well-known that in the northern Pilliga forest, massive environmental damage was caused by Eastern Star Gas at its Bohena No. 2 drill site as a result of exploration practices. Experiences in the United States of America, and in the State of Wyoming especially, clearly demonstrate disastrous problems associated with this industry through groundwater loss, contamination and waste water. Water is used extensively in gas exploration, as it is in gas mining and development. The Yarramalong and Dooralong valleys account for 50 per cent of the water catchment of the Central Coast. This is in a country that is short of water, in a State that is now in its fifth year of drought, and in an area of the Wyong shire that at present is required to purchase water from the Hunter Valley. Therefore the ground water issue is not an irrelevancy or one to be dismissed in a single rhetorical phrase. It is at the very heart of this debate.

I am well aware of the Department of Primary Industries report dated 28 March 2005. It deals thoroughly with the importance of water. I am aware of the Tim Jones report, which also deals with

water. But those matters are not addressed by the Minister. I would be happy to move a motion to extend this debate by half an hour to allow the Minister to address water system issues. But he would simply indulge in rhetoric to justify his conduct. It is not good enough for the Minister to say: I have been transparent; don't shoot me. When the Minister appeared on *A Current Affair* he was constantly caught out by new evidence that was put to him by the presenter of that program. All the Minister could say was, "I will take it on board." All he could say about the new evidence was, "I will consider it."

Only a couple of weeks ago the Australian Gas Alliance met with the Minister and supplied him with legal opinions by Mallesons Stephen Jacques and a Queen's Counsel that show that in fact his action—then only a threatened action—may well be in breach of part 5 of the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act. The Government has now gone so far down the track that it has committed itself to the eventual granting of gas exploration rights in the Yarralong and Dooralong valleys. At present there are two wells in operation, with a further two wells announced. The Government has done very little work on the crucial issue of safe water for the people of the Central Coast.

The Government has avoided a full parliamentary debate on this issue. By the way in which it has crafted this debate, the Government allows only one speaker from the Opposition. The Minister delivered his speech, one Government speaker will support him, and the Minister will reply. Only one Opposition member is allowed to speak. Effectively, there will be three speeches from the Government in favour of this proposal and only one from the Opposition against. That is the way this Government deals with an issue of great significance for the people of the Central Coast. The people of the Central Coast are very conscious of the fact that this Government walks all over them. They know the Government does not take a great interest in their concerns.

Wyang Shire Council has resolved unanimously to oppose further methane mining in the Yarralong and Dooralong valleys. The Minister said nothing in his speech about the concern expressed by the Wyong Shire Council. The Gosford-Wyang Joint Water Authority has expressed its considerable concern about the potential damage to the Central Coast water catchment. The Minister did not deal with that issue. The proposal with which we are presented is process driven. It may well comply with the Act, but it certainly is not compliant with the need of the people of the Central Coast for clean, safe water.

The final issue that remains is whether the Minister is complying with part 5 of the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act. The Minister believes he is, but the legal opinion presented to the Minister only two weeks ago would suggest that he is not. It may well be that this is not resolved by the Minister granting his fiat. I draw the Minister's attention to the opinion given by the Environmental Defender's Office on 26 August 2002 in relation to coal seam methane in the Pilliga and Goonoo regions of New South Wales, the concern expressed by the National Parks Association, and the legal opinion presented to the Minister by Malcolm Craig, QC, and Mallesons Stephen Jacques.

No-one in New South Wales disputes the need for a gas industry. But we on the Central Coast are entitled to satisfactory answers from the Government about our concern for our water supply. I do not believe that any member of this House representing the Central Coast would allow this to go ahead without asking that the water supply to the Central Coast be dealt with. We have not dealt

with that today. A recent report by Daniel Cross dealing with Jilliby Creek and little Jilliby Creek addresses the impact of mining on stream beds, and the potential for bed cracks, segmentation of stream systems and ground water movement away from streams and alluvium. We face a serious issue and we are entitled to a better explanation from the Government.