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Upper Hunter Gas Exploration

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Mr GEORGE SOURIS (Upper Hunter) [5.43 p.m.]: I support the constituents in my electorate who are opposed to the exploration for methane gas in the Broke, Milbrodale, Wollombi, Bulga area. In particular I support the Hunter-Bulga Gas Action Group and many other people who have been in touch with me about not only gas exploration but gas exploitation in the immediate area. The Broke, Milbrodale, Wollombi area is very beautiful. It has been developed over many years for agricultural purposes—in particular, dairying originally—but also now for viticulture and the burgeoning tourism industry. I do not mean just homestay, bed and breakfast, although that is very well catered for, but there are some very substantial wineries. Many have restaurants and cellar door sales and they are well established and attracting many visitors.

In addition to the relatively close residential settlement, the agricultural and tourism areas make it inappropriate for gas exploration and gas exploitation. The Sydney Gas Company, which is a wholly-owned subsidiary of AGL, has an exploration licence under the Petroleum Act for some 17,000 square kilometres in the area. To the disappointment of many, including me, it has chosen literally to undertake exploration drilling beneath the village of Broke. What has particularly brought me to the Chamber today is that the company has announced it is going to undertake some exploration drilling in the Broke village to test the impact on water resources, the water table, and the issue of water disposal.

That is an extremely dangerous thing to do. I do not believe there has been an environmental impact statement, or whatever they are now called, and do not think there has been community exposure, yet the company appears quite willing—and is quite entitled, apparently, under the legislation or the fiat of the Government—to carry this out. There are great concerns. The Hunter-Bulga Action Group has informed me:

Sydney Gas has just announced it is about to drill a test well and draw water from coal seams, which extend under the village of Broke, to see if the water tables under Broke, used by the village for domestic use, "drain away into the coal seam".

Sydney Gas also announced that there will be leakage or methane gas from the test well. Methane gas is over 20 times more destructive to the environment than Carbon Dioxide and is highly explosive.

The action group said much more, of course, but that is enough. I make the point that there must be within that petroleum exploration licence many more thousands of available hectares other than the close proximity to the village of Broke and the closely settled rural areas in the immediate area, including extensive viticulture and tourism developments. I urge the Minister for Mineral Resources in another place—and I note that the Minister for Water is at the table and I am sure he is taking note—and the Government to reconsider the approach that has been taken with this resource and ask the company to move away from these closely settled areas. There are more opportunities elsewhere. It may well find it is an easier path and a more successful commercial path if it does.

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