



15 December 2010

**Submission to the Standing Committee on Regional
Australia:
The Murray-Darling Basin**

Getting more water into the system

This year's floods in all the Eastern States do not mean that the years of drought have ended. This year's rainfall is exceptional □ one of the extreme weather conditions around the globe caused by global warming, but the **average** trend is for drier, hotter climate, so droughts will continue, even become more severe. Unless drastic measures are taken to increase the water supply, restrictions on irrigation and other water uses will be insufficient to prevent the decline of farms and towns in the Murray-Darling Basin. Yet annual floods are expected to continue in North Eastern Queensland.

The Great Boomerang

Ion L Idriess, best selling author of Australian outback adventure stories, published in 1941 *The Great Boomerang*, (Angus and Robertson) presenting a scheme that the flood waters of the short Queensland rivers which at present flow into the sea, pouring mud on the Barrier Reef, should be diverted across the Dividing Range into the head waters of the Darling, thereby saving both the rivers and the farms

Idriess's plan is to make every year a flood year by channelling or piping excess water from the Leichhardt, Nicholson and Cloncurry into the Georgina; the Flinders and Burdekin into Cooper's Creek; the Fitzroy, Dawson, Condamine and Burnett into the Darling.

Every wet season, even in drought years, heavy rain falls on the seaward side of the Queensland Dividing Range; in the far north annual rainfall is measured in metres, not mm. But most of it flows out into the Coral Sea, carrying toxic agricultural waste that is destroying the Great Barrier Reef, and into the Gulf of Carpentaria and is wasted.

The main engineering problem is to take the water from the eastern-flowing streams, close to their mouths, up over the Dividing Range or leading the water through it. Though the Dividing Range is considered to be 900 metres high, there are gaps and lower connecting ridges so the maximum height that water has to be raised would be 300 metres. Apart from its immense scale, the engineering problems of the *Great Boomerang* should be no greater than those faced in building the Snowy Mountains Scheme.

When *The Great Boomerang* was published in 1941 it caused little stir. Australia was involved in the war, fighting Germany in North Africa and expecting Japan to join the Berlin-Rome Axis. *Defence* of our North was the issue of the day, not directing its surplus water into the interior. About the only earth-moving machine was the bulldozer and to carry out Idriess's ambitious scheme, using mainly picks and shovels, would be a tremendous task. John Bradfield, the chief engineer of the Sydney Harbour bridge, gave Idriess's scheme his whole-hearted support, and that was before the days of modern earth-moving equipment, so it should be feasible now.

If the energy of the water falling from the Dividing Range down to the sea is converted into electricity it would relieve Queensland's dependence on greenhouse-gas-producing black coal and other fossil fuels, slowing down global warming. Idriess *wrote*:

There are a number of great waterfalls in Queensland, there are a hundred or more along the coastal lands. If we harnessed the sea of water that roars over all these falls in the wet season our electric power would grow in proportion to the volume of water . . . By making the water do its own work we should be generating electricity and watering our arid interior as well. . . . and if the waterfalls are harnessed, the electricity generated will lift the water. . . . It would be easy enough to send power from the falls to the main pumping stations where the water would be lifted up over the range.

Or the water could be taken through the range by dams and tunnels blasted in the rock, as was done in the Snowy Mountains Scheme to divert water from the Snowy River into the Murray.

The proposed plan for development of the Murray-Darling system appears to be focused on water trading but in drought years there is little water to trade and it is likely to become less. The Idriess scheme is too big to be taken on by any state government. With global warming droughts are likely to be repeated frequently so we need a large-scale, long term solution. The first step in implementing the Great Boomerang is to set up an independent control body similar to the Snowy Mountains Hydro-electric Authority. Idriess wrote:

If we can carry out this Plan we shall not only water two states and the driest portion of a third, but industrialize them as well. And the cost? Goodness knows. But it won't be anything like the cost of a war. And instead of killing millions of people and destroying cities, this expenditure will give a livelihood to millions of people – creating cities with hundreds of thousands of homes for industrial workers, and homesteads and farms.

The Great Boomerang, while being implemented, would provide a complete range of employment: jobs for all except for the unemployable. When complete the Plan would:

- 1** open up the sparsely-settled interior of Australia for close settlement and development of
 - agriculture and industry services,
- 2** generate electricity to cope with this and free Queensland from dependence on black
 - coal and other fossil fuels which produce greenhouse gases and contribute to global warming,
- 3** provide water and electricity to a vast area of the continent stretching from the eastern
 - coast of Queensland to the South Australian coast, and from the North Queensland coast to the South Australian coast,

- 4** enable the watering and irrigation of south-west Queensland to the Territory border, to
the South Australia border and down through South Australia, to the north-west of New South Wales and beyond,
- 5** regenerate the Dead Heart, end the dust bowl and end erosion over a vast area,
- 6** convert South Australia into a State with a thousand lakes,
- 7** prevent the mud brought down by coastal rivers from harming the Great Barrier Reef and
- 8** make more water available to the country between the Queensland Dividing Range and
the coastal ranges, enabling more intensive agriculture.

Idriess concludes:

The gain is to the entire Commonwealth. A vast area of the continent, now comprising arid and even abandoned lands, will become well watered. It will be capable then of supporting many millions of people through its immeasurable increased productivity, and the industrialization that will follow. ... And I believe that if those who first study the cost think of the ultimate benefit to the nation then the cost will not stand in the way.

But we must get busy. The prosperity, the fate, of nations depend not on words alone but on actions.

The Great Boomerang is action.

I hope that you will give Idriess's scheme serious consideration.

With best wishes,

Roderic Wallace Anderson