

# REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

## THE SOLUTION, NOT THE PROBLEM!

A PRESENTATION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

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Mr Chairman,

Can I begin by expressing my thanks for your willingness to stand up for the needs of regional Australia, especially the needs and interests of communities in the Murray Darling Basin.

(While we readily pride ourselves as a nation that believes in a fair go for all, there are times when it seems that the needs of a third of all Australians are easily ignored. The Murray Darling Basin plan presents as a case in point. The work of the Standing Committee will hopefully bring some balance to the needs of the environment and the needs of those who happily regard the catchment as their home.)

The need to make the Basin productive and sustainable goes without saying, but the thought that we might even consider a proposal that takes no account of its economic and social consequences for the communities which populate Australia's most significant region is quite beyond belief.

We are the driest continent on the earth so the confluence of our too major rivers and their catchment must remain a matter of national importance and one which clearly warrants the most careful attention.

In classic terms, we have a triple bottom line agenda which calls for balance, creativity and compromise. Your appointment as Chair of the Standing Committee will hopefully give all Australians their best chance at discovering a plan that is workable and welcome.

Your committee will be presented with a raft of projections as to what will undoubtedly flow (or possibly not flow) if the plan were to be implemented in its present form. I have little doubt that much of what will be presented will be consistent with the thoughts of Mallee Family Care.

It is on that basis that I propose to avoid repetition and draw your attention to some of the other aspects of the issue which also bear consideration.

**In particular, I want to focus on the reasons why we should be concerned more generally about regional development, the consequences of not getting concerned and the importance of giving regions a greater say in their own destiny.**

## **A Little Background.**

By way of background, I should probably declare that I'm actually a regional import, but that I suspect, is true for most of us.

I moved to Mildura in the late 1970's on a two year assignment to establish Mallee Family Care . . . an organisation which is now the major provider of child and family welfare services in Northwest Victoria and Southwest New South Wales.

My decision to remain here is evidence of my love for the district and my belief in the role which regional Australia can play in the growth of our nation.

Despite its relative youth, Mallee Family Care now employs almost 200 staff and 600 volunteers working in foster care, family support, community legal services, community mental health, early intervention, relationship counselling, disability support, financial counselling and community development.

**It's an agency that works with our region's most vulnerable families but I have to say even that demographic is growing as drought, commodity prices and other challenges threaten the region's economy and the livelihoods of its residents.**

While much of our focus is on services of last resort, we strive to give equal attention to what might properly be termed, community building.

In an ideal world, we would wish that we didn't exist but at this point in time, that's little more than a noble thought. At best, we can only strive to level the playing field and create environments that give all children their best possible prospects in life.

It's the reason we have developed projects like Chances for Children, an initiative which seeks to ensure that all young people get the chance to realise their potentials, irrespective of their family's circumstances.

You'll be interested to know that the program is now supporting young people in schooling and higher education with a community investment of more that \$2 million. The fact that this has been achieved with out Government support is testament to the resilience, determination and creativity of our 'can do' communities.

Chances for Children is a program that seeks to ensure that country kids get the same opportunities as their city counterparts. This is not about special treatment or positive discrimination. This is simply an endeavour to redress the disadvantage which attaches to growing up in communities which are isolated socially, economically and geographically.

**Maybe the real challenge of the Standing Committee on Regional Australia is to apply the same balance and creativity to the social, economic and environmental needs of the Murray Darling Basin.**

My years in the Mallee have alerted me to numerous areas of disadvantage and it is all to easy to get lost in a maze of needs, but I am now of the view that the key ingredients for regional viability are all fairly basic.

## **The keys to liveable communities:**

- **Access to quality health care,**
- **Pathways to further education,**
- **Efficient and affordable transport,**
- **Water security.**

While many of us happily talk about the attractions of rural life, the above are all essential to the creation of "good places to live".

My conviction in relation to these issues is evidenced in the priorities I have adopted in my extra curricular activities. . . .

(My involvement in the development of higher education, my membership of the hospital board, my chairmanship of the rail alliance, my membership of Sunrise 21 (Sunraysia Rural Initiative for a Sustainable Environment) and my service as a Mildura Rural City Councillor.)

These connections are not accidental. They attest to my belief that they are interrelated and essential to building strong, liveable communities.

*Given a free choice, people will want to live in proximity to good health services.*

*Good health services require access to GPs and specialists.*

*Medicos will want to practice where their children can access good education*

*(They will also want access to good transport if only to get to the football at the weekend)*

## **But Why Grow the Regions.**

For far too long, the debates around Australia's population distribution have imagined that the regions are the problem.

It seems that our city cousins are inclined to the view that the regions are too expensive to service, their economies are fickle, they are under-resourced and in the context of climate change, they may cease to be the nation's food bowl.

In some ways, it's a view that's reinforced by the findings of Professor Tony Vinson to the extent that the regions are characterised by . .

- Low average incomes,
- Incomplete education,
- High accident rates and
- High levels of mental illness.

Sadly of course most of these issues can be sheeted home to the fact that the regions have rarely received their fair share of the nation's resources.

Australia is almost unique in terms to its population patterns. The vast bulk of our nation clings to sections of the coast and cluster in our major capital cities.

Not surprisingly, our national concerns focus on the needs of our urban centres.

- Congestion
- Planning issues
- Pollution
- Commuting
- Housing and homelessness
- Street crime

In reality, Australia is now having to address the fact that most of our capital cities are rapidly becoming unliveable.

The projections of Dr Ken Henry point to an even bleaker picture.

**Population forecasts in relation to Melbourne predict that numbers will grow to around 7 million by 2050. Similar forecasts can be applied to Sydney and Brisbane and their respective governments are now preoccupied with the need to manage this growth.**

It's interesting that the former Premier of Victoria, John Brumby actually said at the time of his retirement . . . . . "We probably lost the election as a result of our success in growing the City of Melbourne".

Maybe he should have said . . . . . "We probably lost the election because we were too unsuccessful in growing the regions".

(It's ironically a lesson that was learned by a previous Premier, Jeff Kennett, a decade earlier.)

**I guess the point I really want to make is that the regions are not the problem . . they are in fact the solution.**

We would do well to consider the model for decentralisation in Sweden which requires that a range of cultural, education and social provisions are mandatory for regional areas once urban centres reach a specified population.

It is the sort of planning which will ensure that rewarding and sustainable lifestyles are possible 'in the sticks'.

It comes as no surprise that the regions are inevitably ignored in Australia when governments set out to tackle the needs of urban centres. We might take for example the development of the North-South pipeline in Victoria.

The pipeline was proposed and constructed when it was identified that Melbourne needed a more secure water supply and it was all too easy for the Victorian government to determine that water from the regions should to be redirected to meet the needs of Melbourne. The fact that the region from which water was to be taken also happened to be the Victorian food bowl seemed incidental.

**One might wonder how the debate would have rolled out if the proposal had been for the establishment of a South-West pipeline on the basis that the regions were in need of more water and that the water should be supplied from the City of Melbourne.**

There are numerous examples of such double standards and I'm attaching for your interest a copy of a letter which I wrote to Mr Windsor at the end of last year.

One of the services provided by my organisation involves the delivery of counselling and mediation services to separating couples.

In December 2010, it was announced that there would be funding cutbacks and that these cuts would be met by the imposition of fees to those in receipt of services. This fee structure was to apply to incomes over \$50,000.

What's not recognised in this proposal is the fact that this will seriously, again, disadvantage rural communities where low average incomes will probably mean that very few families will be able to contribute to the costs.

Obviously, there is a notion that incomes are equitably distributed across the nation and that each centre, be it urban or rural, has the same ability to pay. They clearly don't.

Another potent example was an earlier decision to impose restrictions on access to youth allowance for tertiary students.

Had it not been for the persuasion of the Australian Social Inclusion Board, the policy would have seriously eroded post-secondary education opportunities for rural students.

It's a simple reality that young people from regional Australia wanting to pursue tertiary education requiring relocation face additional costs in the order to \$15,000 a year. The playing field is far from level.

### **The Need for Change**

The appointment of the Standing Committee for Regional Australia is, in itself, evidence of the need for change.

In saying that, let me hasten to add that this is not about the need for change in the debate on farming versus the environment.

My farming friends are just as passionate about the environment as those who live in the city . . . . it is not surprising given that this is where we live!

What's at stake is the fact that they don't get a say in the debate.

**For as long as I can remember, critical decisions affecting the lives of those living in the Basin are made by those who live in Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne. We now face the same prospect in relation to the Basin Plan.**

A group of scientists with no physical connection to the region will potentially have the ability to determine the future of the Basin without any local input or local recourse.

We are at a moment in time when we can nationally give attention to the balanced development of both city and country. It's an opportunity which must not be lost.

And it can only succeed if locals get the chance to have a meaningful say in the decisions which affect their lives.

**In doing so, they may just manage to save our cities in the process.**

Vernon Knight AM  
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Mallee Family Care