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Dear Tony

You are going to have a rough ride with the adjustment to the water allocations. I want to suggest something that might help.

You may remember how John Button handled the removal of all protection (quotas, tariffs and import duties) that had been enjoyed by the textile industry for many years. These were excessive but had been in place for many years, just like the water allocations. Please have a look at what he did. It was brilliant. To get you started, because of the numbers employed in the industry and the potential disruption to lives and regions, he introduced a programme that reduce the protection over a period of 20 years. There was some impact within the first year or two (to demonstrate something was happening) but I seem to recall that most occurred in the first seven years and it was spread.

This meant that owners of businesses had time to adjust (many years in some cases), staff had plenty of time to look for new jobs or could remain where they were, probably until retirement and any new employees entered the industry knowing that it had a limited future. Funds were also available for retraining of staff.

The owners of textile businesses knew that they were receiving unsustainable benefits or if they did not know, soon came to realise they were because of presentations made by Button and departmental staff. The better firms had probably 10-20 years before they had to close, whereas the least profitable closed after three or four years. These latter businesses of course complained about what had happened to them but their accounts showed what a parlous state they already had been in and funds were available for retraining staff.

Any legislation might have to be passed promptly but the changes need not take effect immediately and morally there should be ample time for adjustment. Because of the major disruptions to communities all along the rivers, one could justify spreading the allocation adjustments over say 20 years. The better farmers will improve efficient use of water immediately (Government finance might be available for this) and a few dry years will prompt some farmers to volunteer to leave earlier. People will still complain but you will be able to argue reasonably, that you have taken their concerns into account.

Good luck. Something needs to be done and this government can do it.

Miles Harvey