



The Hon. Tony Windsor, M.P.,
Chairman,
The MDBP Committee.

Dear Mr. Windsor

Thank you for your letter of October 19th in response to my own email of October 17th. I have delayed emailing this submission until the closing day for submissions as I had hoped that the Committee's initial terms of reference might be broadened.

The establishment of the Committee reflected the Federal Government's concern at the understandable objections from rural Australia to the Government's endorsement of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan ("MDBP") to redistribute the water of the Murray Darling Basin between the environment, city usage and rural irrigation, to the great disadvantage of the latter and the towns that depend upon the economic output enabled by that irrigation. The MDBP assumed that the total water available to the M-D basin was insufficient to support the current needs of these three usages and was forecast to be reduced by climate change. My concern is that this ignores the real opportunities for a far better outcome for both regional Australia and Australia generally, by increasing substantially the total water available to the basin and thus to reduce, postpone or eliminate the need for rationing between the three usages.

The obvious source of additional water input is the substantial water discharged from Tasmania's west coast and much of the means by which it may be harnessed arise as a result of the recent change of government in Victoria. This source of water was initially identified in a series of columns in Melbourne's "AGE" in which Kenneth Davidson argued that Victorians could be spared the massive financial and environmental costs of two ill-judged initiatives by the recently replaced Victorian government - the Wonthaggi desalination plant and the North-south pipeline from the Goulburn to Melbourne. This approach is substantially dependent upon the use of gravity rather than (increasingly expensive and environmentally damaging) electricity and may be summarized as follows.

The bulk of Melbourne's water (~90%) is supplied by the Johnson and Upper Yarra reservoirs, which are high enough to be transferred by gravity up the North-south pipeline to augment the flow of the Goulburn river. This water could be replaced (plus enough additional water to "drought-proof" Melbourne and its anticipated population growth) with water from NW Tasmania, after it has been used to generate electricity by Hydro Tasmania. Because the dams of Hydro Tasmania are higher than Melbourne's other dams, water would flow to the latter from Tasmania by gravity in pipes laid on the flat and sandy bed of Bass Strait, at a far lower variable cost per liter than that of water manufactured at the Wonthaggi desal plant which could then be mothballed. Those who argue that Melbourne is contracted to take water from the latter have failed to publish the terms of that contract but the high operating cost of desalination should leave ample room to pay both compensation to the desal operators and the costs of a simple gravity feed across Bass Strait.

At the very least the sums should be examined before the possibility of increasing the water flow to the Murray-Darling is dismissed in favour of reducing the water available to the irrigation-dependent communities of the Basin.

Of course the capital cost of this proposal would be substantial but so would be the cost to the national economy and, even more so, to affected regional communities if the water needs of their irrigators are not met.

Much of the NBN's billion dollar cost arises from the Government's wish to provide households of regional and metropolitan Australia with the highest broadband speed and capacity that is either already available or can readily be made available to schools, hospitals and other specialized businesses in both regional and metropolitan Australia and to those metropolitan residents who are prepared to pay for it. However, the vast majority of connections (and therefore of the capital cost) would be to domestic premises and small businesses for whom the value of super-high speed broad band is restricted to faster downloads of Saturday movies and the like. Is this "benefit" greater than maintaining the economic health of Murray Darling irrigators and the communities that depend upon them?

Finally, more details are readily available from Mr. Davidson's columns which can be readily accessed on the Age website, most recently on December 13th under "Water from Tasmanian hydro scheme could save the Murray."

Yours faithfully,

George McGregor
20/12/2010