



Tonys Burke & Windsor.
Members of Parliament.

February 14, 2011.

re: Murray Darling Basin Authority – Basin Plan Guide

I am writing to you to register my disgust with the above Guide. While agreeing with multitudes that the plan has many drawbacks in the areas of economic and social impacts, my opposition to the Plan is based on the science behind the Guide. I find that the science in the terms of hydrology and land degradation not only wrong, but current practice will only exacerbate the problem.

The health of the Murray Darling Basin has been in rapid decline since the advent of European settlement. The Basin has been maltreated, misused, mismanaged and misunderstood for the past 222 years. Billions of trees have been felled, the associated understory bulldozed, rivers gutted and wetlands drained. The Basin, like most of Australia today, resembles very little of that of prior to 1788. Exotic species of fauna and flora now reside alongside native plants and animals some which are no more. The biota has been changed forever and it is something we white fellas will have to live with for an eternity.

The Federal Government oversees the MDB through the Murray Darling Basin Authority. This authority began after the Federation Drought prompted the governments, federal and state, of the day to draw up The River Murray Waters Agreement in 1915. This agreement morphed into The River Murray Commission in 1982, to the Murray Darling Basin Agreement and to the Murray Darling Basin Initiative by 1985. The Murray Darling Basin Commission was inaugurated in 1988 becoming the MBDA in 2007. It is the inability of both government and bureaucracy to interpret and understand the hydrology of the Basin and the subsequent land degradation that is at the crux of my opposition to the Plan.

I oppose the Basin Plan because the science behind the Guide is fundamentally flawed. The science is flawed because the MDBA do not understand the hydrology of the land and do not understand the damage to the land from European land management practices. Hydrology is the movement of water over and through the land. We have de-snagged the rivers and removed the cumbungi and grasses from many of our streams. We have drained wetlands and continue to do so. We have built roads and railways, towns and cities all which have a detrimental effect to the hydrology of the land.

The removal of vegetation from river has not allowed water to flood over onto the surrounding land as it once did naturally, flows now hasten down the river eroding the banks with devastating effect giving streams that gorge like appearance. Impurities in the water which were previously filtered out by vegetation are now allowed to continue to flow downstream. It is the removal of this vegetation which relies sugar, salt and water to survive, as all living organisms do, that causes salinity. Salt does not rise up in water tables, salt does not come from ancient oceans, salt comes via rain and the removal of native vegetation creating an imbalance in the land.

The rivers are sick because the land is sick. There are five basic aspects of man-made land degradation (1) soil erosion, (2) soil degradation, (3) ecosystem change, (4) urbanization and (5) climate change. Soil erosion is caused by the removal of native vegetation and overgrazing by exotic fauna culminating in desertification, dust storms and the siltation of streams, dams, lakes, etc. Soil degradation is primarily caused by inappropriate use of fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides, salinity, acidity and sodicity. We know how to counter salinity and acidity, but sodicity dwarfs them in its complexity and breadth. Ecosystem change stems from the degradation of vegetation and the replacement of natives with exotic species. Urbanization promotes the above land degradation by replacing vegetation with concrete and tar and produces intense atmospheric pollution to boot. Climate change promoted by overpopulation, however, may yet be the worst form of land degradation, only time will tell.

This is a very real problem. It is not an uncommon problem, it is a problem that has afflicted and will continue to afflict civilizations past, present and future. The first step in problem solving is to acknowledge the problem. The second is to acknowledge what is causing the problem followed thirdly by addressing the problem via mitigation, compromise and rectification. The MDBA acknowledges that the rivers are sick, but doesn't acknowledge that the land is sick. They are yet to acknowledge what is causing the problem and until they do, the MDBA cannot address the problem.

We do not have a water problem. We have a water management problem. Water has been mismanaged and mismanaged in the extreme culminating in the greed of State governments turning water into a commodity. Prior to the rationalization of the water market, State governments, for better or worse, operated independently of each other. While most of these operations over allocated water, it was nothing of what was to come for the country's already depleted reserves. Prior to rationalization any water not used remained in store however, water trading soon changed that as profiteers soon realized that there was money to be made and by the mid-nineties 100% and more of all allocations were being used!!

At the same time most large cities in Australia began experiencing "water shortages" which in fact were water and infrastructure management problems. Both the rural and urban water shortage problems were exacerbated by so-called droughts ie climate change. Governments Federal and State panicked making bad decision after bad decision. Desalination plants were built and pipes began to run here, there and everywhere. Billions of dollars have been blown with no real effort to address the problems the nation is facing. In fact those same governments were making some the worst decisions in history by ramping up population growth with no thought to infrastructure especially water supply.

After the 2006 Victorian State election the new Premier John Brumby made the two worst decisions in the State's history. By reversing the party's line on both desalination and taking water from the north of the divide, he has polarized the electorate. The two projects with capital costs of around \$7 billion and running costs of \$1 billion per annum before environmental costs are factored in, may be made redundant before the year is out. More than double the amount of water that these two white elephants are capable of producing is available to Victorians for less than \$2 billion!!!

Tipping a heap of water down the Murray or any river for that matter, will undoubtedly, have some short term benefits. However, in the long run the river will return to its degraded form unless we treat the problem as a whole. We have an imbalance in the land and only by addressing this imbalance will we solve the problem. Addressing salinity in the manner that the MDBA currently does hasn't worked, won't and never will, ditto for water trading and nor will water buy backs. Only by improving soil fertility, by storing carbon, by increasing vegetation cover ie enhancing the biota will we solve the problems facing the Murray Darling Basin, the land and the rivers therein.

The quickest and simplest way to achieve that is by increasing the vegetation cover of the region. Everybody can participate in re-vegetation cockies, townies, city slickers, the young and the old, everybody. Re-vegetation schemes whether they be on farm, national parks, public land, back yards and even rooftops. It is imperative that we all do our bit. Increasing the vegetation cover of the land and in streams attracts rain, controls salinity, acidity and sodicity, moderates temperatures and winds, provides shade and most of all produces soil fertility. By increasing vegetation cover and thus soil fertility, we are taking carbon from the atmosphere and storing it in the ground.

Farming practices have come a long way in recent times with minimum and now zero tillage, holistic farming, natural sequence farming, better rotations, permaculture, micro and subterranean irrigation, wicking worm beds and pyrolysis. All of these practices benefit the land by increasing vegetation, by retaining moisture in the soil thus storing carbon. This is win, win, situation not only for farmers who benefit from increased production, but for the community at large. However, cockies are still being encouraged to get bigger or get out. Sell their water entitlements. To specialize ie put all their eggs in one basket. The first rule of investing money is not to put all your eggs in one basket – so why encourage farmers to do that.

Farmer and irrigator bashing is as old as agriculture. It is an extremely cynical exercise that doesn't get anybody anywhere and is usually an escape route for the ignorant, the inadequate and those who have something to hide. Governments, their bureaucracies and big business have trouble, at best, of understanding the fundamentals of agriculture. This lack of understanding leads to fear and those who are afraid do their best to denounce, hide or kill off what they are scared of. Taking cockies off the land is tantamount to taking food off the table. With an ever increasing population we need more food not less. You can eat coal, but it tastes like shit and it doesn't do much for your teeth either.

It is far better to work with farmers rather than against them. They are most resourceful and innovative people on the planet. At the same time they are some of the most gullible too, being fed some very poor and at times totally incorrect advice and information. Instead of removing farmers from the land we should be doing our utmost to put more farmers in a position where they can farm more efficiently both environmentally and economically. We should be encouraging mixed farming instead of specialization. Good farmers look to maintain and increase their soil fertility ie storing carbon in the soil. Cockies are the only people in a position to store carbon on the scale we need to store it to reduce climate change. It is in our own and best interests to encourage and assist farmers to achieve this. We should be paying farmers and paying them handsomely, to store carbon!!

When we invite (twist their arms) farmers to leave the land and/or sell water, we are devaluing the land. The devalued land is then bought (acquired) by other farmers, big business (super funds, MIS type schemes, etc) or dare I say it mining companies. If the land is farmed as a dry land enterprise well and good although the economy of the region will decline. We have all borne witness to trail of destruction and misery of MIS schemes of late and the less of them the better. Miners will destroy the land! Mining accounts for 80%, and rising, of all greenhouse gas emissions. Damage similar to what has occurred in the Darling Downs will occur here. Mining will result in land degradation on a massive scale that will turn the Murray Darling Basin into a wasteland!!!

The Murray Darling Basin Plan Guide is a typical top down process ie the Federal government and its bureaucrats telling people what they should be doing. These processes, more often than not, fail and fail spectacularly as we have witnessed recently with the home insulation scheme. Government and their bureaucracies should consult with farmers, councils, business and the people regarding the aims of such schemes, the various methods of achieving those aims and any impacts that may arise from them. This a bottom up process where those involved make the decisions. The Federal government has failed to do this and now faces a political nightmare.

My conclusion is that the Murray Darling Basin Plan Guide be put aside. That the Guide or any other plan using similar a top down process not be used as a template to revitalize the Murray River or any river until we understand the hydrology of the land, understand the causation and management of land degradation. We have an imbalance in the land and the rivers are part of the land. To improve the health of the rivers, we need to improve the health of the land. Flushing water down rivers will revitalize them in the short term. Reinvigorating the land by increasing vegetation and farming in a ecologically sustainable manner, raising the fertility of the land thus storing carbon will definitely be big win for all Australians.

Cheers,

John Bentley.

PS One of the things that incensed more than anything once the ignorance of the MBDA! A quick search for acidity, sodicity and freshwater lenses yielded one hit for acidity and none for the other two. This despite sodicity affecting around one third of Australia (often sodicity is mistaken for salinity as both contain sodium) see <http://www.science.org.au/nova/035/035print.htm> and Tamie Weaver's excellent 2009 report to the then MBDC and othe bodies "Sustainability of freshwater lenses under major rivers" <http://lwa.gov.au/projects/2998> & <http://lwa.gov.au/products/pn30169> This is the science they are denying, the damage they are committing to the environment and will continue to commit unless stopped. In my opinion the MDBA should be sacked forthwith!!!