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A FAIR GO FOR THOSE WHOSE FUTURE IS IN THE MURRAY DARLING BASIN

As an attendee at last week's MDBA Plan I was impressed by the various suggestions from the floor and the general positive approach by all those whose future in the Murray Darling Basin is determined by the outcome of the plan. The extent of lateral thinking and initiative shows how creative and progressive these communities are in adapting to various challenges.

Their approach was in strong contrast to the MDBA presentation which was to sell, if you excuse the pun, a lake half empty point of view. In fairness they are being constrained by a politically expedited Water Act but it shouldn't mean they themselves can't challenge the narrow terms of reference to allow a fair debate.

However, apart from the constraining terms of reference the most concerning aspect about this supposed consultation process is the process and documentation which I believe has been crafted to expedite a preconceived outcome.

For instance choice of seemingly carefully selected words are designed to determine a certain outcome rather than provide the catalyst for a fair debate.

I appreciate that after this "consultation" period there will be a political decision and that will largely be made by those who live outside the Basin. These politicians will naturally be influenced by their constituents who of course will be influenced by these specifically created "catch phrases" being used to portray the supposed facts. Their perception of the situation after repeatedly hearing these catch phrases will of course be viewed as reality.

A few examples. The document says the government is only buying from "willing sellers" translated to mean the irrigators are happy to sell. Possibly "distressed" or "pressured" sellers after several years of record low inflows may be more appropriate terminology. In my experience farmers are very resilient and enterprising and never give up unless they are forced to.

Another example is the way the buybacks have been structured. It is obvious that their approach will polarise communities across the Basin. Any leader knows how much easier it is to overcome a disunited and divided group even though they may have a common cause. Also on the matter of a 20- 30% buyback no one seems to be able to explain the logic behind these indiscriminate buybacks. Over the last century numerous communities have developed as sustainable self supporting economies. Take 30% revenue out of each of these communities and watch the dominoes fall with the various supporting businesses from banks to bakers leaving town. Surely the economic authors involved in this document understand this process will create not only economic hardship but if they cared to venture beyond their figures also investigate the social consequences of these actions.

Another example of carefully selected wording are emotive terms such as the "Dying Murray", "Environmental Failure" and a 'River in Crises'. These phrases create an impression of a system with a terminal and infectious illness. These words don't really create a vision of someplace you would want to live or visit. Ask tourism operators up and down the Murray how many millions of dollars and jobs this negative campaign using these terms has cost them and their dependent communities.

These emotive words are designed to galvanise every caring Australian of the "urgency of restoring the ecological health of the Basin". It conveys the impression that we don't have time to work sensibly through this once in a lifetime process. We have to accept the plan NOW if the Murray is to survive.

There is time to provide a more balanced view and allow those whose future is determined by the Basin to contribute to solve the problems. The MDBA should amend the plan so all of Australia can see the real picture.

For instance, they should show the system coming alive again from the recent rains – the same way it has for the last ten thousand years. You cannot compare our system to over irrigated European areas as the Australian landscape and ecology has evolved to survive the weather extremes.

If the MDBA really wanted to change the negative perception created by these catch phrases why wouldn't they advertise they are briefly opening all the gates on the Hume Dam to literally show the "rainbow spray" reinvigorating

the Murray. The photo shot would make national newspapers and help give a more balanced view to this biased document.

The word this plan seems to avoid is sacrifice. Everyone accepts they have to make a sacrifice but it has to be fair, equitable and have logic. For this plan to work for future Australians living in the Basin it cannot be allowed to be hijacked by misguided or misinformed people outside the basin or some political agenda.

Those, whose forbears made the Basin such a prosperous region must be allowed to have a fair go in not only the consultation process but also at the decision making table if the \$12.6 billion dollars allocated by the government is to be spent wisely.

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