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To the Committee of the Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

Enquiring into the Murray Darling Basin Plan

Firstly I would like to thank this committee established by the Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia for giving me an opportunity to present some thoughts that I have about the proposed management of the Murray Darling Basin. I use the term Commonwealth because I believe the original intent of those who formulated the concept of Australia was to create a land of opportunity for all its citizens. I believe that today many policy makers unfortunately have the view that Australia is a collection of city states whose interests subsume all others. This I believe has led us to a situation of public policy on critical issues such as water becoming matters of political expediency rather than a product of consultative debate and good long term planning.

I was a farmer for 25 years and had a five year involvement in local government, I was also in my younger days (1970's) an active conservationist being a member of the Australian Conservation Foundation well before such things became trendy. I have had a long involvement in farmer representative bodies including participation in the Minister for Agriculture's Drought Taskforce and the Ministerial appointed committee that developed the management plan for the Katunga Deep Lead Irrigation water supply. Currently I am employed selling real estate.

It is my view that most of the water policy decisions taken in the last 20 years (at least) despite the efforts of many good people have been based on short term expediency rather than long term public benefit and no one is without blame.

The Victorian Government under Steve Bracks undermined billions of dollars in public and private investment in the Snowy Mountains scheme to secure the vote of East Gippsland Independent Craig Ingram. The Snowy might need more water but does it have a higher priority for water than the Murray Darling Basin?

Also under Steve Bracks and later John Brumby the water resources of the Goulburn River were depleted by the diversion through the much touted one way water grid to urban water use in Melbourne, Bendigo and elsewhere. Much was made by the government of their huge investment in the irrigation system to save water. Unfortunately most of this 'saving' is from the Murray Darling basin environment and its communities being transferred out of a very dry catchment to a very wet one. I will not go into the shameless self interest and hypocrisy of the other states involved in the Basin as this is self evident.

Successive Federal Governments and oppositions starting with Simon Crean and Peter Garrett with their sermon on the Murray last century have successively undermined confidence in the basin creating a climate of disinvestment and despair within a community already suffering the ongoing privations of drought. Self appointed experts such as the Wentworth Group (named after the pub that they imbibed at) and other conservation groups all with noble intent were listened to intently by those in power (with an eye to the Green vote) while those most at risk from their policies had little input.

I believe we as a Basin community have to take responsibility for letting things happen rather than making things happen. As farmers we actively resisted proper expenditure by water authorities on maintaining (as we now know with the benefit of hindsight) a cheap and viable gravity flow irrigation system. Solutions were sought from government for this under expenditure in irrigation infrastructure and funds have been provided but there are some very big strings attached and combined with some very rushed planning and construction the eventual result may not deliver a more sustainable system (at least financially) than the older leaky system it replaces.

Local government particularly the Murray Group of Councils have shown great leadership in studying the issues, informing their communities and really forcing governments both state and federal to recognise the needs and aspirations of local communities in this important debate about the future of the Basin. Their submissions to government have been both reasonable and responsible and should be given the prominence they deserve.

In conclusion I would humbly suggest the following constructive way forward.

1. Get government out of the water market. If government intervention is considered necessary take a percentage of all users' water with adequate compensation and let those who need additional water trade without having to compete with the government in the market. Or alternatively leave entitlements as they are and as already exists in the Katunga Deep Lead Water Supply Management Plan take a percentage of permanently traded water as an addition to the environmental reserve i.e. If 100 mega litres of water is permanently transferred a percentage say 5% is retained by the government as part of the environmental reserve.
2. Return reallocated water. Melbourne doesn't need 75 gigalitres of Goulburn river water when it's got a massive desalination plant white elephant at Kilcunda. If the Basin has over allocated its water resources and is considered unsustainable why is Melbourne drawing water from us. Is Melbourne unsustainable and in need of a 37% drop in population? You won't hear that sort of debate on the 7.30 report. The 212 gigalitres that have been reallocated to the Snowy undermining water security in the Basin should also be returned as a better case both environmentally and economically can be made to retain that water in Australia's food bowl than to flush it out to sea. I would also suggest that now that the infrastructure is in place that water for Bendigo, Ballarat etc be supplied from Sugarloaf reservoir through the South/North pipeline as this would give the Goulburn River (one of the Basins most stressed rivers) an improved environmental flow of up to 75 gigalitres but also help to give the desalination plant which in reality sits on an unlimited water supply a greater chance of viability.
3. Involve Basin communities in the development of plans for its future. Local government, farmer and business organisations and other community groups all have knowledge and have something to contribute, let them be involved in a meaningful way.
4. Finally let's be honest if the Murray Darling Basin is unsustainable, population and economic growth in urban Australia is also unsustainable and I don't believe any credible person is saying that. The Basin has big problems but with good engineering, sensible conservation and progressive management involving Basin communities I believe these can be overcome with a good result for all parties.

I know that some of the committee may consider some of my comments unrealistic to the point of being risible but no more than asking our communities to produce more with a lot less water, at a greater cost for a smaller return on our investment. We will survive and hopefully prosper please let it be because of your leadership not in spite of it.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Frank Malcolm