Ronald P. Wilde

17th November 2010

The Committee Secretariat
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Australia
P.O Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Attention: The Hon. Tony Windsor, MP

RE: THE FEASIBILITY OF DIVERTING WATER FROM THE CLARENCE BASIN TO THE MURRAY-DARLING BASIN

Dear Tony,

I was a contributor to the inquiry and Report (2008-2009) by the Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport. Subsequently, I received a copy of this Report which discusses the implications for the Murray-Darling Basin. The National Water Initiative (NWI) referred to in this Report will only manage the available water without providing the essential additional water and therefore in my opinion has failed to meet the critical challenge.

9.10 The Committee concludes that the long-term sustainable management of the Murray-Darling Basin presents significant challenges for the Australian government and the governments of the Basin States and Territory.

9.11 The most critical challenge is the on-going scarcity of water in the Murray-Darling Basin.

The cancellation of the Wolffdene and Traveston Crossing Dams by Peter Garrett and Kevin Rudd reflects the No Dams Policy as set out in the accompanying letters received from Mark Duffy, Director-General, Department of Water and Energy N.S.W. and Chris Schweizer, Assistant Secretary, Environment, Water and Natural Resources Branch. The State and Federal Governments are concerned that the environmental impact of diverting water from Australia's rivers may be high and could range from changes to river ecosystems to significant water erosion (believe it or not) as a result of additional water.

During my career as a surveyor, I have participated in mapping, mining and other major projects in every State of Australia, from Gove to Hobart. I retired from practice in 1987 and have since spent many hours investigating proposals for Watering Australia. From Reports by the R.T. Hon. Sir Earle Page (1945), Rankine & Hill Pty Ltd (1982) and J.G Beale (1985) it became obvious feasibility study was required of the Possibilities for Inland Diversion of Water from the Clarence Valley.

The Reports by Sir Earle Page on the Clarence River Hydro-Electric Gorge Scheme dealt with the shortage of water in Australia. The Clarence River with a constant flow is unique among Australian rivers. He outlined a series of multiple-purpose dams on the Clarence River which could have great advantages for power production, flood control irrigation and navigation.

It would eliminate the frequent devastating floods; ensure continuous production, irrespective of the season: irrigate 100,000 acres of fertile flats and generate continuously at least 125,000 kilowatts of electric energy, equal to 300,000 H.P. with a 40% load factor.

In concluding his Report, Sir Earle Page declared that "in no other electrical development of this magnitude in Australia has so much preliminary spade-work been performed or has so much research material already available".

In 1968, the Premier of New South Wales approved of the constitution of the Clarence Valley Inter-Departmental Committee on water resources of the Clarence Basin. In 1980, Rankine and Hill Pty Ltd, Consulting Engineers, presented to the Committee the results of preliminary investigations into schemes for diverting surplus water inland from the Clarence Basin. The investigation relied on available information and mapping.

No field work or detailed hydrologic, geological or environmental studies were undertaken. No assessment was made of the costs of storing or re-regulating the diverted coastal flow to the inland river system, of the net flows available after losses nor of the benefits that could result from flood mitigation, coastal irrigation or power generation in the Clarence Basin. Also no assessments were made of the stream channel works needed on the inland headwater streams. Comprehensive evaluation of all these matters would be complex and will require much more detailed investigation.

In carrying out more detailed investigations, the Committee considers that there is considerable scope for optimising the size of scheme components and, in particular, for reducing the size of storages should some probability of failure of supply, or some restriction of supply during critical drought years, be accepted. This could lower costs substantially.

The Committee generally agrees with the findings of the report and recommends that detailed engineering, economic and environmental investigations begin into the most attractive schemes, in particular as a first preference, scheme CLA-6C/CLA-7C the diversion to the Border Rivers System of about 750,000 ML per year.

T. JANAWAY
Deputy Chief Engineer
Water Resources Commission of New South Wales
CHAIRMAN

P. MACKENZIE
Principal Engineer, Water Supply
Department of Public Works, New South Wales
MEMBER

R. ROLLINSON
Engineer / Projects Planning
Electricity Commission of New South Wales
MEMBER

The Committee recommended the study of the Clarence Basin and Mr Malcolm Fraser authorised its commencement on Australia Day in 1983. Although both State and Federal Governments acknowledged the necessity for a "feasibility study of the Clarence Valley Basin", it was cancelled by the Hawke Government. Since that time, a "cone of silence" has hung over this project.

In 1985, Jack G. Beale (a former N.S.W. Minister for Conservation and Environment) as Chairman of the Water Research Foundation Australia, presented a proposal for the full investigation of the Clarence Hydro-Electric Scheme, which he described as a "sleeping giant of water, power and natural wealth".

This scheme could divert 2 million megalitres (four Sydney Harbours) annually to the Murray-Darling Basin.

Pump-storage of 3,000 megawatts could provide peak electrical load to N.S.W. and Queensland.

From these schemes proposed by such eminent men, we can assume there is an abundance of water and energy available in the Clarence Valley Basin as shown by the six major floods in the Basin this year.

Once again, we are awaiting the allocation of water rights on the Murray-Darling River. If the irrigation farmers are adversely affected by the Report, it has been suggested that up to 28,000 workers will be lost to the Murray-Darling Basin.

Irrespective of the decision, it is obvious that it will not alleviate the problem as recognised by the Senate Committee (June 2006). The Committee found that the "most critical challenge is the ongoing scarcity of water in the Murray-Darling Basin".

I set out herein a précis of the available Reports and correspondence relating to the feasibility study.

1) The Report by Rankine and Hill Pty Ltd, which was supervised and recommended by the Water Resources Commission of N.S.W. The Department of Public Works and the Electricity Commission. It was commenced by the Fraser Government on Australia Day 1983 only to be cancelled by the Hawke Government.

2) The reply dated 24th August 2008 from the Australian Government Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts which in effect sets out the NO DAMS Policy.

3) The reply dated 23rd October 2008 from the N.S.W. Government Department of Water and Energy, which also has a NO DAMS policy, especially if associated with Hydro-Electric generation. The ETS has emphasised the importance of the Snowy Mountains Electricity Commission, which provides 74% of the renewable energy on the Eastern Mainland and 24% nationally. This represents a displacement of more than 5 million tonnes of Green House gases that contributes to global warming each year.

4) The Report of the Senate Committee (June 2009) of the Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References.

5) The April 2009 Submission to the Senate Standing Committee.

6) The 27th April 2009 submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport.

7) The proposal by Jack G. Beale, who was a Consulting Engineer and Chairman of the Water Research Foundation of Australia. He was an advocate of the Snowy Mountains Scheme and Minister for Conservation and Environment.

8) The proposal by the Rt. Hon. Sir Earle Page was supervised by the Water Conservation Commission of N.S.W.

9) The Clarence Basin has been affected annually by floods, which cause extensive damage. Already this year there has been six floods of varying size, as shown by the photograph of the fresh water, 10kms at sea.

10) The National Water Commission engaged the Snowy Mountains Engineering Corporation (SMEC) to undertake a study to identify the potential of additional sustainable extractions of water from the Tweed, Brunswick, Clarence, Richmond and Wilson catchments.

11) Plans to pipe water from Northern N.S.W. to South-Eastern Queensland were scrapped by the Rudd Labor Government. A report by the Snowy Mountains Engineering Corporation recommended a dam on the Clarence River to deliver 100,000 megalitres across the border each year. However, as the N.S.W. Government declined to cooperate, the full objective of determining sustainable levels of extraction could not be achieved.

In one flying visit to Grafton, Kevin Rudd has decreed that there will never be any sharing of water between the Clarence River and Queensland. This is a continuation of the NO DAM Policy which allows the floodwater to flow unused into the ocean.

NSW Government Agencies were invited to contribute to the study but did not offer any assistance. Consequently no meetings were held with N.S.W. Government Departmental officers. Indeed SMEC requires approval of its client before any information is made available.

Ron Wilde
SURVEYOR (Retired)