

DISSENTING REPORT

I dissent from the majority of the Committee in both tenor and fact in two key areas.

1. The Living Murray Initiative and the 'First Step' water recovery project

The Committee has favoured the "Wentworth Group" view of the state of the Murray. That is, the Murray is near death. This view has been promoted in order to justify huge increases in environmental flows.

In paragraph 2.16-2.17, the Committee confirms their view that the river is stressed and supports the view of Wentworth Group scientist, Professor Young, that river flows will probably continue to decline over the next 20 years.

I dissent from the weight given by the Committee report to only one point of view regarding the health of the Murray. The Committee Report only gives a passing reference to other points of view that the Murray-Darling is not really so stressed as widely thought and a great deal more science is required to make informed views.

There are equally prominent public figures with different points of view to the Wentworth Group that do not appear prominently in the report. For example:

Paul Weller, President of the Victorian Farmers Federation, who said "The Worldwide Fund for Nature is funding the Wentworth Group, who have unashamedly promoted the view the Murray River is dying in order to justify huge increases in environmental flows"; and

Dr J Marohasy from the Institute of Public Affairs, who stated that her basic position is that the quality of water in the Murray is not in decline, and that claimed rises in salinity levels are not true.

Given the above, it follows I cannot concur with the Committee's statement at paragraph 2.18, which states: "In light of these figures the aim to recover 500 gegalitres for the environment seems too little rather than too much..."

While the Government acknowledges the release of 500 gegalitres as a first step, it is by no means a small amount. To the contrary it is a historic step and a major step towards achieving significant environmental benefits for six key ecological assets:

- Barmah – Millewa Forest
- Gunbower and Perricoota-Koondrook Forests
- The Hattah Lakes
- Chowilla Floodplain (including Lindsay-Wallpolla)
- The Murray Mouth, Coorong and Lower Lakes; and
- The River Murray channel

The water for the environmental flows required under this first stage is expected to come from a combination of engineering works, better management of river flows, on-farm water efficiency savings and some purchase of water from willing sellers.

While the Committee begrudges this significant policy announcement, I praise it.

2. **Example of over allocation: the Lower Balonne**

I dissent from the Committee's report and conclusions regarding the lower Balonne River if for no other reason the Committee takes an unbalanced view of this vexed issue. It takes a particular New South Wales point of view and does not consider properly the Queensland point of view. It is incumbent upon the Committee to report both sides the case.

Moreover, the Committee should have deferred its report by a few days until it could have received the final report of the Condamine-Balonne Water Resource Plan by the Queensland Government. This would have allowed the Committee a chance to incorporate Queensland's position.

The following points present a more balanced case:

Firstly that the Lower Balonne irrigation community support the creation of proper concise and accurate science, which stands the test of peer review. The irrigation community would be first to make changes to practices, with compensation, if the science showed there were unsuitable impacts.

As well as the irrigation community, the businesses who are supported by irrigation, totally oppose the use of emotive untested claims and assumptions, that do not have the backing of accurate science that stands the test of peer review.

The second issue to note is that Professor Peter Cullen and his scientific committee assessed the river system to be ecologically sustainable at this time and the irrigation community are committed to undertaking reviews into the future to monitor and ensure that they maintain ecological sustainability.

The third issue to note is that the Queensland and New South Wales Governments established a Ministerial Council Forum to manage issues associated with the sharing of water resources in the Border Rivers region. This

would seem to be the primary Forum for addressing water sharing in the Border Rivers region.

Fourthly, the Federal Government has announced a \$195,000 Natural Heritage Trust funded scoping study into the Lower Balonne Floodplain to provide ecological, social and economic information for determining the sustainable flow needs for the Floodplain and the needs of stakeholders in the region. The New South Wales and Queensland Governments have agreed to provide two government representatives for the Project Steering Committee overseeing the study. There will also be one Australian Government representative on the Committee.

The abrasive approach taken by the majority report towards the Queensland situation is counter-productive to finding a resolution. Furthermore it creates a situation of those in glass houses should not throw stones. It is common knowledge that many of the New South Wales rivers and underground water resources are overallocated. As one Queensland farmer put it "the more water that New South Wales can ensure runs over the border from Queensland the less pain New South Wales has to endure in any clawback of overallocation."

The Committee report relies too much on personal opinion and assumptions. For example, I reject outright the following statement at paragraph 5.59:

"It is now clear that the government of the day was at best shortsighted, at worst reckless and overpowered by self-interest, in allowing this level of development...."

It is critical that future strategies be undertaken according to the science of the matter and with the cooperation of the parties and the above comments work against this aim.

There is no doubt the situation between New South Wales and Queensland needs to be resolved and the Federal Government can play an important role in bringing about a resolution. However I further reject the Committee's comment that the Commonwealth could legislate control over the matter using the external power (section 51 (xxix) of the Constitution).

It is a grand over-reaction that would bring about unnecessary political and social division. The signing of the National Water Initiative shows that cooperation between the States and the Federal Government in this area of competing interests can be achieved in the national interest.

Senator Julian McGauran

11 August 2004

