



Kelvin Thomson MP
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WATER AMENDMENT BILL 2008
14/10/2008 Second Reading

Mr KELVIN THOMSON (Wills) (6.23 p.m.)—Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is hard to imagine a clearer example than the question of water policy to substantiate the proposition that the Liberal Party creates problems and engages in divide and conquer politics while the Labor Party brings people together to solve problems. The *Water Amendment Bill 2008* before the House represents a historic agreement for the long-term reform of water management in the Murray-Darling Basin. It introduces a new set of cooperative arrangements between the Commonwealth and states so that governments, industry and community can tackle water scarcity and water security. The Murray-Darling Basin Authority created by this bill will have the autonomy to prepare a basin plan, the first ever single basin-wide water resource management plan. The Basin Plan will take account of future climate change and address the legacy of past overallocation. Labor wants to tackle the consequences of climate change and tackle the problems of overallocation of water from the Murray-Darling Basin to irrigators.

Contrast this constructive, forward-looking attitude to solving this nation's serious water problems with the undermining efforts of the Liberal and National parties. About four weeks ago the Victorian Liberal Party horrified the business community by coming out against the Victorian north-south pipeline. This is a win-win pipeline which improves water supply both for regional communities and for Melbourne. The Liberals oppose it. And in his first week as opposition leader, Opposition Leader Turnbull allowed the member for McMillan to ask a question opposing the desalination plant at Wonthaggi. This plant is an important part of the planning for Melbourne to continue to have drinking water, given Melbourne's rapidly increasing population and the change which has occurred to Melbourne's climate by way of reduced rainfall.

It is the same with the Murray-Darling. The Australian and New South Wales governments spent \$24 million to jointly acquire the Toorale property to restore flows in the Warrego River to the Murray-Darling Basin. This move was welcomed by farmers downstream of Toorale Station. It was welcomed by water experts. It was welcomed by environmentalists. But was it welcomed by the opposition? No. The National Party member for Calare and the member for Maranoa, who just spoke, said that the move would remove a productive property from the food chain. The member for Calare said that the economy of far western New South Wales had 'taken a massive hit'.

There is a common theme here. When it comes to water issues, from Melbourne to the Macquarie Marshes the Liberal and National parties created this

nation's water problems through their overallocations and inaction. They have no solutions for this nation's water problems and when Labor comes up with a solution—whether it is a pipeline or a desalination plant or an irrigation property purchase—they run interference on our solutions. The attitude of the Liberal and National parties towards water problems is a terrible shame. It has damaged the Murray-Darling and it still stands in the way of improving the situation. This is regrettable, even disgraceful, given just how serious the problems of the Murray-Darling are.

I have been pointing out these problems in the House for over seven years and during that time the health of the river system has continued to decline. The Murray-Darling Basin Commission advised me in August this year that average annual inflows to the River Murray system over the period 1891 to 2007 were over 11,000 gigalitres. In 2006-07, inflows to the River Murray system were approximately 1,000 gigalitres—only nine per cent of average annual inflows. It is worth noting that the Murray-Darling Basin Commission says:

Findings to date suggest that large scale drivers of south eastern Australian climate are already being affected by global warming, reducing rainfall and runoff in the southern Basin and Victoria.

It is important that members opposite wake up and realise what is going down here. We have members opposite who still do not believe that carbon emissions are causing changes in the world's weather, or who think we do not have to worry about this till next century. The National Party member for Calare said in parliament:

We were not going to make long-term decisions based on a six- or seven-year drought.

He and other members opposite say that the only problem is that there is a drought on and we are not getting enough rain. Just what does he think climate change is? It is when your climate changes and you do not get the rain you used to get. I wish Bill Clinton, who famously said to the Republicans, 'It's the economy, stupid,' was around to listen to the Murray-Darling debate. I am sure he would tell some of those opposite: 'It's climate change, stupid,' or 'It's global warming, stupid,' because they just don't get it.

The present situation facing the Murray-Darling is very, very dire. Acid sulphate soils, referred to as the 'cancer of the Murray', are present in the Lower Lakes in South Australia, in northern Victoria, in south-western New South Wales and in southern Queensland. In Queensland it has been reported that 12,000 wetlands are at risk. The Coorong and the Macquarie Marshes have been trashed, turned into basket cases. I, and I am sure other MPs, have received desperate correspondence from Mr Bill Barton, a Hindmarsh Island farmer and real estate agent, and from the Marina, Hindmarsh Island, imploring us to take action to tackle the overallocation of water to upstream irrigators and to save the Lower Lakes and the Coorong. In August, thousands of people gathered at the mouth of the Murray at Goolwa to call for action to save the stricken Lower Lakes. We read articles about the Coorong headed 'Death of a Ramsar site' and 'Death of the Coorong', noting the catastrophic decline in numbers of birds and fish. We read that the level of the Lower Lakes has now fallen to 50 centimetres below sea level. If it continues to fall and the lake beds are exposed, they will become irreversibly acidic and toxic. There has been an 85 per cent reduction in shorebirds in the Coorong since 1985. It is a dramatic decline in just 20 years, and I commend the work of the Adelaide academic Dr David Paton, who has been drawing this unfolding debacle to our attention for years.

The Macquarie Marshes, another Ramsar listed wetland, has gone the same way with declines in wetland vegetation and decreases in the number and diversity of wetland birds. The Humane Society International reports that the wetland vegetation of the southern Macquarie Marshes is almost completely dead and that of the northern region of the marshes is barely surviving. I commend the work of the New South Wales academic Professor Richard Kingsford who, like Dr Paton, has been drawing this unfolding debacle to our attention for years.

But while the Murray-Darling has deteriorated the Liberal Party, through front groups like the Institute of Public Affairs and the Australian Environment Foundation, has tried to undermine efforts to save it. The Institute of Public Affairs employs senior Liberal Party personnel like John Roskam and Mike Nahan. Its board contains former Liberal Party ministers, Alan Stockdale and Rod Kemp, son of the Institute's founder, Charles Kemp.

In June 2004 it was revealed that Australia's largest irrigation company, Murray Irrigation Ltd, had contributed \$40,000 to the Institute of Public Affairs. The director of the IPA's environment unit—quaintly named because it is actually an anti-environment unit—Jennifer Marohasy, is reported to have played a critical role in persuading a government committee to overturn recommendations to increase the volume of water released into the Murray River. In June 2006 Bill Hetherington, who had been chairman of Murray Irrigation Ltd from 1995 to 2005—that is, the period when Murray Irrigation Ltd was a major funder of the IPA—was appointed to the IPA's board of management. So the Institute of Public Affairs, a Liberal Party front, was getting corporate dollars to run junk science about the Murray River claiming it was all right and did not need action by way of environmental flows. They should hang their heads in shame at their role in this debacle.

But Jennifer Marohasy continues to undermine efforts to save the Murray. She is opposing the Victorian state government agency, the Victorian Environment Assessment Council, recommendation that 100,000 hectares of river red gum forests along the Murray be converted from state forest to national park. For the record, I support the establishment of the Barmah, Gunbower and other national parks recommended by the Victorian Environment Assessment Council and I commend the Victorian National Parks Association on its efforts to secure a very significant nature conservation outcome for the Murray River.

I also want to congratulate Dr Arlene Buchan from the Australian Conservation Foundation and Amy Hankinson from the Inland Rivers Network for the great work they have done to try to save the Murray-Darling. I have no doubt that, if more attention had been paid to what they have been saying over the years, this mighty river system would be in much better shape rather than reliant on the life support it is now on. The Lower Lakes and the Coorong would be in much better shape, the Macquarie Marshes would be in much better shape and Adelaide, which depends on the Murray River for its drinking water, would be in much better shape.

Members opposite have sat on their hands and allowed this tragedy to happen before our eyes. The purpose of the *Water Amendment Bill 2008* is to amend the Water Act 2007 to give effect to the intergovernmental agreement on Murray-Darling Basin reform signed by the Prime Minister and the first ministers of each of New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory at the July 2008 meeting of the Council of Australian Governments. The reform intergovernmental agreement has also resulted in the

negotiation of a revised Murray-Darling Basin agreement, which will come into effect at the same time as this bill commences.

The bill will enable water resources in the Murray-Darling Basin to be managed in the national interest, optimising environmental, economic and social outcomes. The bill complements the Commonwealth government's \$12.9 billion Water for the Future plan announced by the Minister for Climate Change and Water in April. It relies on the Commonwealth's constitutional powers and a referral of powers to the Commonwealth by New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Queensland to enact certain measures which include transfer of the current powers and functions of the Murray-Darling Basin to the new Murray-Darling Basin Authority, strengthening of the role of the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission and enabling the basin plan to provide for critical human water needs.

This bill delivers on a Labor election commitment to bring the Murray-Darling Basin Authority and the Murray-Darling Basin Commission together into a single body known as the Murray-Darling Basin Authority. It will be an expert agency with functions and powers, including enforcement powers, that will ensure sustainable and integrated management of basin water resources. It will establish arrangements for securing critical human water needs for people dependent on the River Murray. Murray-Darling Basin regions will benefit from improved strategic water planning and management arrangements that will reflect the interests of the basin as a whole.

The coalition has never embraced a holistic solution to the crisis in the Murray-Darling Basin. For example, the member for Farrer said to the parliament in 2003:

I would like to see our own agriculture department detach itself from the environmental debate somewhat and conduct some critical analysis of exactly what these proposals mean—

referring to conclusions of the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists—

to agriculture and what threats they pose to agriculture.

Of course under the policies championed by the member for Farrer agriculture in the Murray-Darling has suffered greatly. We had the now Leader of the National Party answering a question from the member for Farrer in the parliament in 2003. He said:

The Labor Party policy is essentially to take 1,500 gigalitres off irrigators in country towns and just flush it down the river—who knows where, who knows when and who knows why? ...

What an appalling ignorance he displayed of the significance of environmental flows. This is the kind of attitude which has brought the Murray to its knees. The former Leader of the National Party, Mark Vaile, in February 2007 said:

The member for Grayndler says that the Murray needs a drink but he does not acknowledge that there is a drought on. In one of the comments he made in this speech he said: 'Labor firmly believes the overallocation of water licences is a primary source of the water crisis.' The primary source of the water crisis is that there is a drought on! I do not know whether you had noticed, but there is a drought on!

This is the kind of attitude which has brought the Murray to its knees. We had the member for Calare in parliament in September saying:

We had a plan that was going to be sustainable. ... We were not going to make long-term decisions based on a six- or seven-year drought—and that is what it is. There have been droughts this long before and there will be droughts again.

The member for Calare said on ABC radio Central West in June this year that rain 'is the only way we're going to get out of the present dry situation for the rivers.' This is the kind of attitude which has brought the Murray to its knees. This is the kind of policy which has given us salinity, algal blooms, declining water birds, dying river red gums, and a Murray mouth which is on life support.

Mind you, the coalition is not above speaking with a forked tongue, saying different things to different constituencies. We had the member for Sturt saying on Adelaide radio in March that there should have been a billion dollars being spent on returning environmental flows in the Murray-Darling Basin. But as soon as we spend a dollar on it, the member for Calare attacks us.

Science is telling us quite clearly that climate change along with overallocations is putting significant stress on our rivers and the aquifers, and this is no more apparent than in the current condition of the Coorong and the Lower Lakes. Decades of regulation and overextraction of water from the river have reduced freshwater flows. This has been exacerbated by global warming, and as result the ecological character of these internationally significant wetlands is seriously threatened. All but one indicator of ecosystem health is negative and getting worse, including those of native plants, turtles, fish, frogs, birds and everything else that relies on the unique ecosystem for its feeding and breeding habitat.

The situation in the lakes will deteriorate further if prompt intervention is not undertaken, for without sufficient water allocation we will not have ecosystem recovery from the current adverse effects. This sort of change will take years or decades to recover from. Extensive ecological changes have already occurred that have prompted Dr Kerri Muller, an expert on the lakes and Coorong, to warn of an Aral Sea of the south eventuating if urgent remedial action is not taken.

The Australian Conservation Foundation has put forward a proposal identifying six properties that could be purchased by the Commonwealth, New South Wales or Queensland governments which are strategically important to the Darling and Murray rivers. These properties could provide at least 300 gigalitres in the short term to address the immediate crisis in the Lower Lakes and Coorong, and over 400 gigalitres could be recovered each year on average for the Darling and Murray rivers for years to come.

This targeted water purchase approach and release would be timely as there would be minimal losses incurred in moving the water through the river system now due to lower evaporation rates over winter and less seepage due to recent floods. Purchasing the full water entitlements from a property, or purchasing the whole property including its entitlements, will have double benefits by helping a seller exit the industry—or their business, if desired—and also enabling the removal of banks and channels that are funnelling water away from the rivers.

The unfolding ecological crisis in the Ramsar listed lower Murray lakes and Coorong needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency to avoid consigning these environmental treasures to the graveyard. The Australian government is buying water entitlements from willing sellers in the water market—and the member for Maranoa was objecting to this process, but that is what it is—in order that overallocation is addressed and so that rivers and wetlands will receive more water when it is available.

Unlike the coalition, the Labor government has its policy house in order, and this bill represents another step in addressing the policy challenge of securing a sustainable water supply in the face of a changing climate and the pressures of economic development. The Australian people want action to save the Murray-Darling Basin. The Commonwealth is responding with practical measures to relieve the stress on the rivers and confront, through cooperation with governments, industry and the community, the challenges of water scarcity and water security that will deliver a sustainable future.

The Murray-Darling Basin has suffered significantly after years of neglect and mismanagement, and as a result is under enormous strain that is adversely affecting communities, industries and the natural environment. This bill heralds an era of national leadership whereby cooperation and collaboration between Murray-Darling Basin governments is the order of the day, and where basin-wide water resource management and reforms to the governance arrangements of the river system will secure its long-term future.

It is absolutely critical that this problem is tackled with a real sense of urgency. We have had decades of neglect and inaction. We have had people pretending that the problem did not exist, that the River Murray was okay. We have had people saying it is someone else's fault to fix and people in one state blaming people in other states and saying, 'Everyone else needs to lift their game.' The truth is we need cooperation, we need national leadership and we need to understand just what a priceless asset the Murray-Darling Basin is for this country, its agriculture, its industry and its environment. All of these things are of inestimable value to us as a nation and as a community and we need to put our shoulder to the wheel to save the Murray-Darling Basin. I commend the government on bringing this bill before the parliament.