

HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

TUESDAY 29TH NOVEMBER 2016

MURRAY-DARLING BASIN PLAN

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond) (15:51): I rise to talk about the Murray-Darling Basin Plan and reflect on a lot of the discussion lately and commentary certainly today as well from Judith Sloan from *The Australian*, who is recommending, of all things, the dismantling of the barrages at Goolwa. I want to speak from a submission I made to the Senate Select Committee on the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

After attending the Murray-Darling Basin public hearing in Goolwa on 8 December 2015, I think it is necessary for reasonable questions to be asked on some of the submissions given. Referencing the *Hansard* taken, one recommendation was:

that the Senate Select Committee recommend the restoration of the Murray River's natural estuary, that the tide return and that the Southern Ocean push in each autumn and for longer periods during the drought.

Further to those comments, I think it is relevant to discuss detail from a book called *A Fresh History of the Lakes: Wellington to the Murray Mouth, 1800s to 1935*. The information presented illustrates a time line leading up to the construction of the five barrages at Goolwa, Mundoo, Boundary Creek, Ewe Island and Tauwitchere.

Prior to the 1935 construction, there were many years and decades of discussion and investigation into possible deterrents of sea water whilst still maintaining an ecological balance in the Murray-Darling Basin. It was noted that from 1887 to 1889, there were fears of seawater intrusion in the lower River Murray as a result of irrigation extraction. This occurred as river levels were unable to hold back the sea. This was when the discussion began in relation to building barrages and locking the Murray.

Throughout 1902, the Murray Waters Commission took evidence at Victor Harbor, Goolwa and Milang on the state of the lakes, which were becoming saltier. As a consequence of saltiness in the water, reeds and waterweeds were dying. Further findings and comments by the interstate royal commission conducted on the River Murray indicated that, due to low water levels in the lakes, 'instead of water being fresh, as it should be naturally, it has either been brackish or as salt as the sea.'

By 1903, reports in *The Southern Argus* state that, 'instead of the river rushing out to sea, the tides of the ocean had flowed in', followed by a further report in the *Sydney Daily Telegraph* regarding Hindmarsh Island, 'which used to support large herds of cattle in its succulent reed beds, has been turned into a saline waste'. In 1912, further reports in *The Southern Argus* stated that if barrages were not constructed, then there would be the chance of each year finding conditions worse and worse. I quote:

Evidence given to an Enquiry into the construction of barrages included from Mr Holtham of Narrung 'the reeds and rushes started to go out in 1914.' 'I worked at Narrung for 5 or 6 years before salt water appeared (in 1912)' Mr McNicol. ER Rankine of Hindmarsh Island 'I have noticed the reeds and grasses that grew along the edge of the river have gradually died. As soon as we get fresh water they come up again.'

The information above provides a clear indication of what implications the Murray River and Lakes could be presented with if the Murray were to be restored to an estuary. I believe that if this were to be the recommendation of the select committee, it should also recommend that all 3,500 other structures in the Murray-Darling system be

removed and that all man-made channels be filled in. This would be back to nature, and it highlights how ridiculous a proposal it would be to remove the barrages.

What should be considered is the upgrading of all five barrages to fully automated systems to increase their efficiency, along with a detailed investigation on a Lake Albert to the Coorong connector, including a full environmental impact statement. I am also a firm believer in irrigation upgrades throughout the basin to return water to the system. The great work that has been undertaken in South Australia in irrigation efficiencies over 60 years could well be replicated.

It is important to recognise that the already legislated Murray-Darling Basin Plan is in place so that all those who share this great resource, whether it be for critical human needs, food production, or the environment, have a responsibility to make sure this vital river system prospers into the future. I fully believe that with infrastructure upgrades, especially upstream from South Australia, we can return many hundreds of gigalitres of water to the system so that we can still maintain productivity, maintain the environment, and maintain access to vital water for critical human needs.