River Murray ferries etc. – 5th March 2008

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond) (15:39): I rise to speak today on the government's lack of timely action on river infrastructure below Lock 1 on the River Murray. We have an ongoing problem at the moment with the ferries at Swan Reach, Walker Flat, Penong, Mannum, Tailem Bend (which goes across to Jervois) and Wellington. At the moment, load limits are being put in place on several of these ferries and, as of tomorrow, the ferries at Walker Flat and Penong will only be able to carry loads of up to 12.5 tonnes. This will cause a severe restriction on trade for the locals. Freight operators—and one of them only rang me yesterday—are severely concerned that they will have either to head up to Blanchetown bridge or come down to Murray Bridge and charge extra freight to people in regional communities who are already suffering from this extended drought. People do not want to be in a position where they feel that they are ripping off other people.

The northern ferry at Mannum has been out of action for two months and it has been a ripe opportunity for the government to extend the ramps on the northern ferry at Mannum while the river is low and get on with the job. The government has put a cost on this of $500,000, yet the council has said that it could do it for $200,000. I have another suggestion: I reckon you could get together a group of cockies with a couple of welders and some angle grinders to do the job for $50,000, if they were given the opportunity. I think I would soon be able to round up plenty of volunteers to do the job because issues of access for emergency vehicles, school buses, etc., have to come into play.

It is interesting to note that the other issue with ferry access is the fact that the government has not acted quickly enough on applying for the clearances through the Department for Environment and Heritage, including cultural clearances. It is all right to say that we cannot do the work because all this has to happen, but this drought has been ongoing in the Murray-Darling Basin since before 2002 and to say that it has just snuck up on us is a fallacy. People have known the river is going to drop: we know what the forecasts are and we know what has happened in the past. So, the government needs to get on with the work and stop ignoring people. It is not responsible government to ignore people of this state and deprive them of the right to freight and public transport that they need in these communities.

It is interesting to note that the Wellington ferry, if things get that desperate, will be the last one in operation near the site of the temporary weir, if it ever goes ahead. When the weir announcement came out around 16 months ago, no forward planning was immediately put in place to assist these communities with both access to water and access as far as ferry operation and boat ramp access is concerned. I acknowledge the community groups once again for the tireless work that they do around the Lower Lakes and I acknowledge the grit and determination of people down there who are spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on their own survival. They are planning to survive not only this drought but for many years to come with the installation of tanks and desalination plants. But the pipeline planning that the government has really only got serious about in the past couple of months should have been ramped up from November 2006 when the announcement of this terrible weir proposal was put forward.

I note that Minister McEwen, in answer to a question I asked last week regarding what he would do about the Lower Lakes infrastructure for water, said that he would advocate strongly at the primary industries ministers' meeting in Cairns. It will be interesting to learn how hard the minister did advocate for the area because I know privately that he has virtually written off the chance of the Narrung Peninsula having access to water via a pipeline. These people are in desperate need. The community has recognised the fact that it needs to make an obligation to it and this all needs to happen.