

Leadership in time of drought – 16/10/07

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond): The thing that seems to be lacking in this time of exceptional drought is real leadership. Farmers accept the vagaries of the industry - fluctuating prices, demand, markets, competition and changeable weather, but this is an extraordinary time which, despite assertions of this being the worst ever drought, many saw coming and have warned of it for years.

The Murray Mouth closed over completely for the first time in 1981, yet water allocations across the Murray-Darling Basin have increased since then. Plantings and production have increased substantially, benefitting the state's economy, but what real planning has the government done to sustain this growth into the future?

They have a bold vision to increase the state's population by up to a third. People are like crops, they need water to survive. In promoting population growth without a clear plan to secure water from somewhere other than the Murray this government is adding to the ever growing over-allocation problem.

Talking to people around the Lower Murray and Lakes one finds that constant themes emerge;

- perceptions about how little their survival seems to matter to the city folk,
- perceptions on the level of real government assistance,
- and contempt held for many people whose real understanding of their situation and needs is shallow at best.

Families whose knowledge of the land and best farming methods are irreplaceable are breaking up. Some have sold out despite falling values. They are the lucky ones. Others cannot find a buyer.

Sons and daughters are leaving the family unit, leaving the industry and leaving the area, many never to return. Farmers accept that reality but their real lament is that nobody else seems to care, government in particular.

Many of these people have wrestled with the elements and market forces and they are battle hardened survivors.

But this time it is different.

One woman told me that she had noticed a worrying change at meetings recently. The menfolk just sit silent, (which is more than the Attorney-General does), with empty faces. It is the women who are fighting on, but they are not fighting for their livelihoods, they are fighting to keep their families safe and together. Yet they still see water being pumped to Adelaide.

One family I can refer to has about one week of stock water left. They are rated among the top 10 per cent of dairy farmers in Australia for quality milk. They have 30 years of genetics in their herd, with some animals worth up to \$1,200 each. They have used the lowest quality river water to produce the country's best milk. Now they are lucky to get \$300 an animal at the meat-works, but who really cares?

This family has a daughter in the hills. She is constantly amazed by the careless attitude of neighbours and workmates who insist that they will not let their lawns and gardens die. So their frustration and anger is heightened. Who does care?

They need a mains supply in their area and they need it now. The government chose not to put a main in for fear of it becoming a 'stranded asset', just like they would not move on desalination because they were frightened it might rain. Well, how wrong they were. What sort of 'stranded assets' have we got now?

The Hon. P.F. Conlon interjecting:

Mr PEDERICK: You haven't got any assets. Some of the most efficient dairies in the country will be gone. And where is action man Mike Rann? Nowhere to be seen. Just when they need a Main Man.

Another irrigator from the Lower Murray has broken up their herd. One hundred and fifty have gone to Victoria, 40 have been parked on another property, and 100 have gone to the meatworks.

Lot-feeders cannot take calves because they cannot afford the grain.

It is not feasible to convert their dairy from irrigated to dry land because the cost of hay and grain and power and operating costs just rules it unfeasible. This family has not found Primary Industries particularly helpful in parking stock and giving advice. Their perception is that Minister McEwen is only interested in the South-East as the only place for dairying and for operating a dairy industry.

They believe very little traded water is coming below Lock 1 and they say the industry will be gone by Christmas, and again there is the over-riding perception that the government does not care. 'Where are our leaders,' they ask?

And all the while Managed Investment Schemes suck water by the dam-full, and what for? Thousands of hectares of new plantings. Consider this: it takes 13 megalitres per hectare of water to establish new almond trees, while it takes 7 megalitres per hectare of water to produce 20 tonnes of dry feed for dairy cows.

Where is the equity?

Where is the commonsense?

Where is the prioritisation of a limited resource? It is out there in bucket loads when it comes to supplying the city.

But most of all where is the leadership?

People want real assistance. They do not want more workshops.