

MURRAY RIVER DROUGHT MANAGEMENT – 15th November 2007

(Includes additional debate from other members)

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond) (11:35): I move:

That this house expresses its dismay at this government's inability to manage the River Murray in South Australia through a drought that is as much man-made as it is climatic, not just as a source of water, but also as the state's environmental and economic cornerstone.

As has been ably pointed out by my colleague the member for MacKillop, this government's boast that South Australia has the country's best record in recycling is due in no part to its own efforts. It has not made any; it has just taken the \$1.61 billion profit generated by the former Liberal government's restructure of SA Water and bragged about its budget surplus and AAA rating.

While the government seeks praise for its constant deferring of a decision to build a weir at Wellington, the reality is that tardiness on this whole matter has generated almost as many problems as 700,000 tonnes of rock dumped in Australia's greatest river would generate. I do not want to sound ungrateful for the fact that the weir has not been built, but the fact that it remains a possibility is almost as big a problem. Premier Rann's bold announcement on 7 November 2006 was a classic case of the Premier's belief that the headline is all that matters and the small print is someone else's problem. His announcement was un-researched and ill-conceived, but it sounded good to all the Labor voters at the time. It did not matter to him that it was impractical, vastly understated in cost, socially divisive and environmentally catastrophic.

The pull-a-figure-out-of-the-air guesstimate of \$20 million for a weir, placed in a position that has long been known is impractical and impossible, shows just how irresponsible the statement was. As it now stands, the weir, if it is ever built, would likely cost between \$110 million and \$200 million, and no-one knows how much it would cost to remove. The fact that some experts believe the rock wall will subside one metre every 18 months into the soft base of the 2.6 kilometre span from Pomanda Island to Wellington Lodge suggests huge, ongoing annual maintenance costs and reduced effectiveness; and perhaps, ultimately, will deny us the ability to ever restore this vital part of Australia's biggest and most important Ramsar-listed site to its former condition.

Mr Rann was quick to claim such environmental champions as Dr Suzuki among his supporters. I can tell the house that when Dr Suzuki learnt earlier this year of this proposal through one of my constituents he was gravely concerned and, according to his response to my constituent, asked the Premier to forward a copy of his explanation to that constituent; to this time no such explanation has been provided.

The government's first action on the weir was to try to find a way around the commonwealth's Ramsar commitment. If it had instigated a proper environmental impact statement, then and there, it would have been completed by now and either reassured us all that the damage would not be completely irreversible or taken the whole proposal off the table, thereby relieving the entire community and the Eastern States of this continuing uncertainty. This would have allowed a great many of the state's food producers to make better decisions about their own critical situations.

When doctors talk about the dire health problems such indecision is causing, one has to believe that this is not sour grapes or sour milk from moaning farmers. Suicides are the

biggest worry for many families and communities, and the general health issues that arise are many and varied. Worse still, some rural doctors are finding it hard to justify remaining in shrinking communities—which compounds the problem.

It is difficult, but not impossible, to understand why the government is continually delaying this decision, but the question that needs to be asked is: why are we in this position? There are some who believe that Mr Rann is secretly happy about the federal government's insistence on a full EIS—which has just got underway. It means that he does not have to be the one who knocks his own idea on the head if that is the decision. But thinking people will see past that and they will be asking why it has come to this in the first place: why was the Premier so keen to promote a plan that his minister has been telling us ever since 'the government does not want to carry out'?

One of the reasons the government wanted a weir is that it said it could not lower the pump off-takes below Lock 1. 'It can't be done,' they assured us. We kept asking the question until eventually they said that they can be lowered to minus 1.5 metres AHD but no more. It was welcome news, of course, but we still pressed them for more depth. They insisted, 'It can't be done.' Lo and behold, they are now able to get the pumps down to minus 2.1 metres AHD—another 600 millimetres.

It is amazing what you can do when you do not have the soft option of a weir on tap. This is mismanagement of the highest order. So is ignoring the obvious side effect of accumulating water above a weir wall at Wellington. Salinity and toxicity would blow out to unacceptable levels. Apart from being unusable to all direct users around the Lower Murray and lakes, it would have a catastrophic effect on the native aquatic flora and fauna.

The government conceded this fact on 16 February this year, but has never offered any solution to the resulting problems. Could it be that we have to build a desalination plant at Murray Bridge to service the just-in-time pipeline supplying the Upper South-East? That would be another world-first for the government—a desalination plant on the river. Now the government wants to extend Mount Bold to multiply its holding capacity fivefold from 45 gigalitres to 240 gigalitres. What will they fill it with? The vital river that has been the main artery of South Australia's existence is to be mismanaged even further, with more non-existent water pumped away to fill another dam. Yesterday's thinking from yesterday's leaders!

On top of this, the government has separated groundwater from surface water by having two different ministers, whose responsibilities are so poorly defined that even they seem unsure of who should deal with what. There was a clear example of this confusion and mismanagement during estimates when I asked the Minister for Water Security a question about the rainwater tank rebate scheme. Minister Maywald declined to answer, saying that it was not her responsibility, and chastised me for not knowing that before I asked the question. Minister Maywald declared it to be the responsibility of the Minister for Environment and Conservation. Only three weeks before this, a letter to me from Minister Maywald about the rainwater tank rebate scheme states 'this matter now falls within my portfolio'. How can the government properly manage these things when its ministers contradict each other—and even themselves—about responsibility for water management?

There is a widely held view around this end of the Murray (and further upstream) that while cotton and rice growers were originally seen to be the problem, the real villain is the big managed investment schemes that earn huge tax offsets to establish new plantings of olives, vines and almonds—which are hardly vital to food production in this time of drought. What is the government doing about that? What approaches have been made to the relevant authorities to curb this activity—at least for the short term—while the production of essential goods and

survival of existing plantings is at stake? If we were running out of fuel oil would it simply be sold to the highest bidder to do with it what he liked, or would it be thoughtfully distributed to the most essential users?

My colleague from the West Coast (the member for Flinders) has spent years trying to make this government take responsible action to manage water quality and supply issues on Eyre Peninsula, some of whose water is drawn from the River Murray. Not surprisingly, Mr Rann and his cohorts have trouble seeing anything beyond the end of city limit signposts, so West Coast farmers go on paying to maintain infrastructure that the government should better manage. Further to the West Coast problem, repeated and sensible efforts to provide a solution to their own water problems through funding and building local desalination plants have been thwarted by the government's nonsensical refusal to allow them to put that water into existing SA Water supply lines. Surely, that is smarter and cheaper than further strangling the ailing River Murray.

Scientists have been telling governments for over a decade that water resources in the Murray-Darling Basin are over-allocated, yet less than half the state's homes have rainwater tanks. The confusing and half-hearted subsidy offered by this government is nowhere near as attractive as the aggressive and effective schemes being offered interstate, and the low uptake has demonstrated how ineffective it is.

Editorial opinion expressed in various country and Riverland newspapers all agree on one thing: the SA government has bungled every aspect of management of the state's water crisis. From allocations to backyard gardens, they have managed to upset everyone. The heavy-handed schoolmaster approach to domestic water users is typical. Instead of presenting ways in which to promote and encourage water conservation and reduce consumption, they go for the big stick method. Any behaviourist would tell you that, if you have a donkey and a stick, putting a carrot on the end of the stick and holding it in front of the donkey will have a quicker and longer term effect than using the stick to whack the donkey's behind.

In Queensland, for example, which has been on level 5 restrictions since April this year, the government has instituted incentive schemes to encourage home owners and businesses to save water. The programs are many and varied, and include home water use audits to give residents the information they need to initiate changes. The rewards are substantial and the results are impressive. I understand that Queensland now leads the nation in water conservation.

I note that the South Australian government has at last announced incentives for householders to be introduced in January. It is long overdue, in the dry driest state in the world's driest continent. Until now, all we have had is the bucket brigade, which has been great for physiotherapists, but not much help with respect to the water crisis.

And how is this government managing the effects on tourism? The government's management of that is best characterised by an item that appeared in the *Murray Pioneer* on 28 September 2007. The headline says it all: 'No impact on tourism: Maywald'. This was in reference to the closing of Lake Bonney and to reassure local tourism operators. She offered the explanation that, even after a year, the lake's surface would reduce by only 5 per cent.

Apart from ignoring the fact that this closure was likely to be somewhat longer than 12 months, it also overlooks the fact that, in tourism, as with so many other industries, perception is reality. Tourists making decisions about holidays and travel plans will base them on their perceptions of the situation at Lake Bonney—and, for that matter, the rest of the river, from the border to the mouth. If people think that is not happening, they should talk to any houseboat hirer or other tourism operator up and down the river. Bookings have dropped

and cancellations are up. So much for 'No impact on tourism'! Then again, tourism is not Minister Maywald's portfolio, as I am sure she will be quick to point out to me.

One thing that this government has done is to waive transfer fees paid by irrigators endeavouring to top up their water allocations through this difficult time. But why did it take so long to decide and announce it? One major player in the water market has expressed surprise at the delay and said, 'It's disappointing that it has taken three months for the government to make this decision', explaining that the delay has created confusion in the marketplace—more mismanagement.

The Liberals' 19-point water plan, announced last August by our leader, Martin Hamilton-Smith, seeks to employ a number of measures to take the pressure off the River Murray. It was roundly condemned by Premier Rann in this house a few weeks ago, yet all he has offered since is a half-baked plan for a desalination plant—a desalination plant promoted originally by the Liberals—and a 10-year plan to extend Mount Bold, which would further plunder the River Murray, was Rann's idea. Moreover, last November, the government rejected our three-pronged legislation to make better use of existing stormwater, grey water and sewerage resources, but offered nothing in its place.

What is the government doing to work with and support irrigators in the region to secure sufficient water to maintain permanent plantings that will be vital to the quick recovery of food production and the state economy once this crisis is over? The Liberal Party has again led the way by meeting with Riverland irrigators and actively looking for ways in which to help them through this crisis. It is already too late for many of them, as it is for the growing number of dairy farmers who have run out of confidence in this government and their future. The whole fabric of life in country South Australia will be torn apart by this mismanagement.

The former Liberal government instigated and championed the Lower Murray Reclaimed Irrigation Areas project, which was a program to rehabilitate swamps along the Lower Murray. Local irrigators applauded the plan and began taking action to implement it. Unfortunately, a change of government in 2002 spelt trouble for this worthy project. The incoming Labor government was half hearted about it, and what should have been done in two years dragged on and on as it tried to extricate itself from spending money in the country. Five years later, the LMRIA is still not completed, and landowners of the remaining un-rehabilitated swampland are fighting all sorts of battles to see it through in the spirit of the original plan.

As I said at the beginning, it is evident that much of the infrastructure and activity now in place that relieves some of the state's dependence on the River Murray was instigated or promoted by the Liberal government. To call this government's handling of the River Murray and the state's water resources in general 'mismanagement' is being very generous. At the very least, it has been more like crisis management and, at worst, simply a lack of management.

The following text is included as part of the debate on Mr Pederick's motion.

Mr PENGILLY (Finniss) (11:49): I rise to support the motion of the member for Hammond and to thoroughly endorse the comments he has made this morning about the way in which the River Murray has been mismanaged in South Australia. The situation at the moment with respect to the Murray is a cause of enormous concern to me (and, I know, to every member at least on this side of the chamber). It is disastrously affecting the lives of so many people, and it will have a devastating effect on the economy of South Australia.

Indeed, later on today, I understand that there will be a rally on the steps of Parliament House by a group of irrigators who can see the lifeblood not only of the River Murray but also their

own businesses, their way of life and their homes, disappearing as they watch every day. It is enormously concerning that this government has failed and, in particular, the Premier and the minister seemingly have not done anything to remedy the situation.

In fact, I visited the Riverland the weekend before last, and there is a mood of great anger about the activities—or the lack of activities—of the member for Chaffey with respect to what she is doing about these things in her electorate. One does not have to move very far around the traps in Loxton and down through that country to pick up the vibrations that are rapidly building up over the inactivity, as people see their precious bit of water disappear down the river to be pumped up into reservoirs to supply Adelaide. It is unfortunate that this is creating a 'them and us' situation.

The fact of the matter is that we have been experiencing this drought across the nation now for five years. This government has been in place for five years, and it has done absolutely zilch to supply other sources of water to the people of South Australia and, in particular, to the most populated area, Adelaide. They are still pumping from the River Murray. We heard only yesterday that the irrigators are going from 16 per cent to 22 per cent. Well, that will not save anyone. It will do nothing whatsoever for the whole economy, particularly the Riverland and as you come down along the Murray. I think we face some enormous problems.

I listened to Professor Peter Cullen this morning in the Natural Resources Committee. Speaking to him before he went into the committee, he said that he has major concerns about the enormous amount of algal bloom that will happen. There is just nothing up the top, and there is nothing in the storages. He said that the period of hot weather we are facing at the moment will only exacerbate the situation. He predicts catastrophic algal blooms the length of the Murray. He is also predicting that, in the very near future, we will see a fish die-off in the Murray the likes of which we have never seen before, and he has no doubt about that whatsoever. Indeed, Professor Cullen showed graphs this morning on the lift in CO₂ until the year 2100 which, quite frankly, were just frightening; and the graph he showed on the snowfall reductions over the last 20 or 30 years in the Australian alps indicate a steady decline.

Of course, ultimately, some of that water comes back down through the Murray-Darling system. It does not all come down; I am well aware of that. The Great Dividing Range has a fairly serious impact on where all that goes. Really, we are just slowly seeing our lifeblood fritter away. With respect to the economy of the whole Murray, the member for Hammond talked about the tourism side of it. I have been trying to talk up the tourism side because water is still there. Obviously, there is not much flow in the river, but water is there and everything is still operating.

It is important that every member of this parliament, no matter their political allegiance, supports the tourism industry and supports those businesses that rely on the Murray. I do urge that members pick up on that. We have been fiddling around now listening to prolonged verbal dialogue from the Minister for the River Murray. The minister should become the minister for the Murray not of the Murray. The minister and the Premier need to get realistic and do something about providing an alternative water source for Adelaide so that water produced from a desalination system can be put into the storages and used through the system that supplies a lot of the people of South Australia.

That water can be used in the economy of the Murray by those irrigators the length and breadth of the Murray. We talk about South Australia at this stage because, obviously, I think that is the part with which we need to deal. The fact is that the water that is coming into the reservoirs in Adelaide should still be in the system and supplying the River Murray. I believe

it is a sad indictment of the government that it has not moved to put in the desalination plant to take the pressure off the Murray.

The member for Hammond eloquently described many of the catastrophes that people are facing—family catastrophes. He described the potential for suicide. In a further motion today we will also discuss issues to do with the Murray, but the failure again by the government to do something about it concerns me greatly. The failure by the minister to listen to her own people in her own electorate of Chaffey concerned me greatly when I was up there nearly a fortnight ago. They are desperate. Desperate people do desperate things.

In fact, it is suggested that 1,000 people will attend the demonstration out the front today. It will be interesting to see the member for Chaffey in her capacity as the minister for the Murray out there talking to people. I suspect that she will be nowhere to be seen, quite frankly. We will go out and listen. You need to talk to people and listen to their concerns. The upshot of it is that something earnestly must be done to provide an alternative water source for Adelaide to take the pressure off the Murray.

Quite clearly, no-one in this place wishes more than I do that this drought would end. It is just a disaster for Australia, particularly south-eastern Australia. I support the motion of the member for Hammond.

The Hon. R.B. SUCH (Fisher) (11:57): This is a very unfortunate time for South Australia, particularly those who earn their livelihood from extracting water from the Murray—and obviously people use the water for things other than irrigation. The basic fact is that we have a very severe drought. That does not mean that everyone is off the hook, and that governments are off the hook in terms of what they can or cannot do, but I think we need to put this into a context. First, the reason the Murray is under a lot of pressure—apart from the obvious factor of the drought—is because people have been taking too much water out of the Murray.

You cannot take out more than what is replenished by nature. The situation is man made in the sense that we have created a regime that has ensured that the water in the Murray is basically over-allocated. That has been reflected in the stupidity of the Victorian government, first, under former premier Bracks and then under Premier Brumby. To suggest, as they did, that no change was really required—that their irrigators could continue to operate the way they had because that is the way they wanted it—is just irresponsible and ridiculous.

What we have as a consequence of people (particularly upstream) sucking a lot of water out of the Murray is that it has put extra pressure on that very limited and fragile resource. We know that many of the people who hold the irrigation licences upstream (as much as we can ascertain under the secrecy regime we have) are senior people within the coalition and senior people linked to the coalition, mainly through the National Party.

We have many water barons upstream who have very big entitlements, who are big users of water and who are prominent National Party people. No-one wants to say too much about it because it gets a bit embarrassing for certain politicians to identify that, but it is the case. We have also had a tax regime not only under the federal government of the past 11 and a bit years but, sadly, even prior to that which encourages speculators and people to engage in what are euphemistically called managed investment schemes (MISs). The more common parlance would be tax dodging. This is where I have great sympathy and empathy for the traditional farming families and traditional family irrigators who are now suffering the consequence of these big boys and the tax dodgers coming in to suck water out of the Murray.

At the end of the day, their heart and soul is not in horticulture. They are not passionate about horticulture; they are passionate about making a quid. We know that anyone in irrigation or any other enterprise wants to make a dollar, otherwise they do not survive. Many of these people, in fact the overwhelming majority, do have a passion for their industry and horticulture. They take delight in producing good crops of fruit, vegetables and other products. What is happening with this tax dodging arrangement is that, even today, we are still getting new plantings along the Murray—it is hard to believe. Where is the criticism of the people who are planting now? Where is the criticism of the people who overplanted in the past 10 or so years in areas not only adjacent to the Murray but also elsewhere? We saw it in the wine growing areas where areas were planted simply for the benefit of minimising or reducing taxation.

It has had serious consequences—the chickens are coming home to roost for irrigators and also for the environment. It was interesting to see (I think it was either the night before last or last night) the Premier and the Minister for Water Security on the promo talking about the plight of the irrigators (with whom we can all empathise), and the visual on the TV news was overhead sprinklers. I mean, in this day and age, the amount of overhead irrigation that should be used should be an absolute minimum. Of course, smart irrigators use modern electronic water sensor meters and so on.

However, in many cases, especially in the other states, we still have the inappropriate use of irrigation techniques such as open channels and overhead sprays, which waste water. I think it is fair to say that our irrigators have been much more efficient than many of those upstream in the Murray-Darling system. An issue that really concerns me, too—and I have argued this case before—is that we have the law of the jungle when it comes to irrigation licences, whether they be temporary or permanent licences.

The golden rule applies: if you have the gold, you end up getting the licence. It is squeezing the little person, namely, the small family irrigator, as hard as anything who in their desperation seek to hang on to a water licence. Their choice is to hang on to it or sell it and maybe live off the money. However, the big boys (the Macquarie Bank operators and some of the plantation companies) have been buying up water licences, and obviously, in a tight water situation that has forced up the price of short and long-term allocations. If you have the law of the jungle, it is hard to complain then when the tiger starts to eat you, because that is the system we have. I think we need to revisit that. I know that some academic economists argue that it is the best system because it will result in increased efficiency in the use of water if it is purely market driven, but I think you need to moderate that, in the sense that you also have to take account of other factors.

We do not have an open market in many areas of our society, and it is probably just as well, otherwise some people would have all the gold while others would only look on. I think the open, free market law of the jungle is really hurting many of our small irrigators at the moment. The other aspect is that we cannot know who owns these licences. We find out through innuendo, rumour and various articles which suggest that the Macquarie Bank has bought them up and even suggestions that Woolworths has bought them up. I do not know whether or not that is true, but that is what people are telling me.

There should be public listing of irrigation holders for the whole length of the Murray-Darling system. We should know quite clearly and openly who owns the entitlements to the water. It is no different from knowing who owns a property. Anyone can find out who owns a house or a farm; why should irrigation licences be any different? The sooner that system is changed—at least in South Australia—the better.

As I said earlier, I have great sympathy for the traditional family farmer and the traditional family irrigator, but I do not want to see any government helping to bail out the tax dodgers or the management investment scheme operators. They took the risk; they take the risk. They keep saying, 'We live in a capitalist society.' Well, you take the risk, you wear the consequences. If it had been a different situation and they had been rolling in dough because everything was hunky-dory, they would not come rushing saying, 'We are willing to pay a little extra to the community because we have done very well out of this resource.' If you play in a tough game like a capitalist system, you have to wear it when things go tough.

I think that the request for low interest loans or no interest loans to irrigators to help get them through is sensible. I share their passion. I am an amateur horticulturalist and I would not want to see my trees, which I have lovingly cared for for over 30 years, disappear. I can imagine the pain these people are suffering. It is time that we stopped just blaming nature for what has happened to the Murray but also blame the greed of some people and the lack of management in the various states in relation to allocation of water. If we do not tackle those issues quickly, then, sadly, many of the irrigators will go down and so will their crops and their trees, which, in many cases, they have nurtured for 15, 20 or 30 years—and you cannot replace them overnight. I am just getting my first crop of almonds after many years. The Minister for Environment and Conservation and her parrots will probably get their fair share, but it takes a long time to get a return. I have some sympathy with some aspects of this motion.

Mr WILLIAMS (MacKillop) (12:07): This is an important motion and probably no other motion will be debated in this parliament this year that will be as important. We read regularly about the relevance of parliamentary debates, and I read in the daily newspaper here in Adelaide this week that the parliament should spend more of its time debating matters of importance to the state. There is nothing more important to South Australia at the moment than water: where we get our water from, where we get our supply from and how we will go about it.

Interestingly, this motion has been on the *Notice Paper* for some time and, while I think I am the fourth speaker from this side of the house, not one person from the government has stood up to address this matter. That interests me. We have conventions here that we give notice of our debates so that all members know what is coming up so that they can prepare themselves and join the debate. As I said, I am the fourth speaker from this side of the house and not one speaker from the government thinks that this motion is important enough to be addressed. Why is that? Because the government is severely embarrassed about what it has done.

Mrs GERAGHTY: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker: I think that the member opposite is misleading the house. The convention is that in most cases one would listen to the debate from the opposite side and whatever the member who is moving the motion has to say. That is generally the convention in this house, and you are misleading the house.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: There is no point of order.

Mr WILLIAMS: I might have to call a point of order myself shortly if members continue to call frivolous points of order, because all members here know that that is against the standing orders. The government is severely embarrassed because it has been on notice for a long time that we are facing a desperate situation, yet the government has done nothing. Three years ago the federal government put on the table millions of dollars for projects for waterproofing the North and the extension of the Virginia pipeline. The money to build the pipeline from the Glenelg waste water treatment plant has been on the table for three years, as has the money for waterproofing the South. Where has the South Australian Labor government been? Nowhere to be seen. It has taken three years for them to be so embarrassed that they have

come to the party with a few dollars to put into it. That is how slack this government has been on South Australia's water future.

I had this discussion with the minister the other day while we were examining the Auditor-General's Report. I invite every member to pick up the Waterproofing Adelaide document and look at pages 14 and 15. Look at the graphs which clearly indicate that, when that document was drafted and released back in 2005, we could see that with the continuation of the drought under drought conditions in about 2007-2008 Adelaide's water consumption was going to be greater than its supply. So, we have known that and the government has known that for at least two years, if not three or four years. It is not anything new, yet the minister denied it here in the house. It is plain as day in the document.

The minister might suggest that we did not know that the drought was going to continue, and that has been the downfall of this government, because they hoped and prayed that it would rain and they did nothing, they sat on their hands, just hoping that it would rain. The reality is that we have had a drought across the Murray-Darling Basin and the catchment at least since 2002. This has been going on for five or six years. Again, this government has sat on its hands and done nothing.

Since I have taken over the role of shadow minister for water security, I have made it my business to get around, particularly in metropolitan Adelaide, to see some of the fine work that is being done. Some fantastic work has been done in South Australia and in Adelaide. Unfortunately, very little, if any of it, has been done by the state Labor government. Some terrific work has been done by local government, particularly that by the Salisbury council, and I think that everybody here knows about the aquifer storage and recovery program that is being run by the Salisbury council.

Everybody knows about the water reuse program and involvement that GH Michells, the company at Salisbury, has with that project. It is a fantastic project but why has it not been replicated across metropolitan Adelaide? Where has the state government been? The state government's attitude to stormwater is to get it to the sea as quickly as you can and get it out of the way. All the government is worried about is flood mitigation and it has failed to see the potential.

The federal coalition has agreed to fund a project not unlike what the Salisbury council has done at Parafield at the Adelaide Airport. They have agreed to \$40 million, which is what I think they have said they would put towards it. That would have the potential of saving 50 gegalitres of water a year which is water that today runs out to the sea through the Sturt Creek, Brownhill Creek and the creek on the northern side of the airport. Fifty gegalitres a year is about one-quarter of Adelaide's water.

If you talk to people like Peter Gillan at the CSIRO about the work that he has been doing for a long time and the serious study that has been going on over the past four years, you will see that you can put stormwater into the aquifer, particularly after you have put it through a wetlands cleansing process as has been done at Salisbury, and put it into the aquifer, draw it out again 12 months later, and the water quality is such that you could put it straight into our pipelines (our distribution network). You do not have to have great dams to utilise this water source. The water source is there before our very eyes.

The research is being done in our universities and academic institutions. The government is taking no notice. The government has failed the people of South Australia. Go up along the river and talk to the irrigators—and I will be talking to a few of them in a minute or two—and see how they are going to get along, because those permanent plantings right along the river—billions of dollars worth of trees, crops that produce year in and year out, and give the

state an economic benefit of about \$1.5 billion per year—will be lost. Grapevines, orange orchards, other citrus, stone fruit—the trees will be lost.

I spoke to a grower earlier this week. He and his family have invested \$7 million. They were hoping to get their first crop this year. He told me that his almond trees currently have a crop with the potential of \$700,000 if he could water it. He told me that they have borrowed another \$1 million, and they bought some water, but it is not enough to keep them alive, and he is now expecting to lose the lot. He will not pick the crop; it will not save the trees from death. And the government has done nothing.

I have put to this minister that this government made a commitment under the Living Murray project to source 35 gegalitres of water. Currently, I think 13 or 14 gegalitres has already been found and put aside for the Living Murray project. Why doesn't the government go into the market at the moment and buy the balance of that 21 or 22 gegalitres of water—buy it and make that water available? The government's commitment is not to put it into the Living Murray project for another two years. Why doesn't it buy the water now—it will have to have to buy it at some stage—and utilise what is available out of those licences today to help save some of those permanent plantings?

What did the minister say? Her answer to me in the house the other day was: 'Well, the New South Wales government is not keen for us to go into the market.' The growers on the river are not keen to see their crops die. I am amazed that the state government can stand back and do nothing, when for about \$70 million it can go into the market and buy enough water to at least make sure that those crops survive.

The Hon. R.J. McEwen: How much?

Mr WILLIAMS: About \$70 million, your colleague the minister told me last week.

The Hon. R.J. McEwen interjecting:

Mr WILLIAMS: I was told \$70 million by your minister. The government should buy it, and see if she can save those crops—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! The member's time has expired.

Mr VENNING (Schubert) (12:18): I rise to support the motion very capably put by the member for Hammond. It goes on from my speech, in the house yesterday, in relation to the problems that we are having. My speech yesterday was about water transfers, and how long it has taken for people to transfer their water, and to get the water to the people who have permanent plantings, and also to get the money. I want to know how the department can find funding to pay water meter readers and inspectors to cruise the River Murray in ski boats on weekends looking for those misusing water and doing the wrong thing but cannot find enough staff to be employed by the department to process water transfers.

The minister spoke to me yesterday after my speech in the house, but the fact remains that there is still a huge backlog of seven or eight weeks on these transfers. In the words of one department employee: they are under-resourced. It is clear that the situation is totally unacceptable. To place even more stress upon those who are already enduring tough times is a slap in the face to farmers and irrigators. Regional South Australians need the Rann government to work with them, not against them, in finding a solution to the problems. I certainly want to pay tribute to all those people who have contacted my office. One in particular is keeping me abreast of the problems they are having.

I note the speech by the member for Finnis was good, as is his wont—a capable public speaker. I think the member for Hammond talked about the history of the Lower Murray irrigators. I was vitally involved with that. To see that happen, it is quite serious. With the Lower Murray irrigators, the actions were started by the previous Liberal government and

finished by the previous minister, Mr Hill. With the weather and the seasons being the way they are, it is sad to see that, since we have done these things, what were once lovely green flats are now, in many instances, dead or dying and reverting back to the native blue fly or sandfly swamps that they used to be. That is very sad indeed. Nobody intended for that to happen, but it has.

We have several options in relation to our problems, and they have already been highlighted by the members for Hammond and Finnis. I, too, went to Professor Cullen's presentation at the NRM committee this morning, and it certainly was a wake-up call to all South Australians. Most of us knew about this, but it was interesting to hear what he had to say. We certainly are now entering a time of great crisis in South Australia, and there is no sense in trying to beat around the bush or over-inflate or underestimate it. We have over allocated our water use for the entire length of the River Murray—not just in South Australia—and that needs to be addressed.

We still do not have a sign-off on the federal government's River Murray initiative, and that is an absolute disgrace. The state Labor government (particularly Victoria) is playing politics with this issue. It is not an easy thing to say but, hopefully, after the federal election we will get some commonsense in relation to this issue, because the \$10 billion is there for immediate use to try to alleviate the problems that we have. As \$3 billion of it has been allocated to buy water back, it should be bought back instantly and put to good use to try to save the river.

As I have said in the house, water trade is bad in South Australia and it is taking far too long. Professor Cullen suggests that the water registries of Victoria and New South Wales are much better than ours. We on this side of the house have been saying that for some months. He suggests that we either copy the Victorian model or put our scheme under theirs and work together. Better still, why don't we have a national River Murray water registry and deal with one? That is commonsense. Again, that is cooperation between the states, but that is not happening.

What sort of a crisis do we need for something to snap and for these things to happen? It is in the overall best interests of everybody, on all sides of politics, that we do that. I think it was a good wake-up call. I do not think Professor Cullen was trying hard this morning not to be political, but I think he was pretty fair, even though a couple of questions were pretty political, particularly when he was asked about desalination and he said that it was just one of many options that we have to have. It is the same water; it is the same river, and we must fight against the holding of water upstream to the detriment of South Australia and, importantly, the health of our river.

We know about the lakes, as the member for Hammond very capably mentioned them in his speech, particularly when he talked about whether the government should or should not build this levee. I think it has been proven by very strong advocacy by both the member for Hammond and Finnis that it is not a good idea. I originally thought it was a good idea, but they have convinced me that it is not, and I think the government has also come to that conclusion. Anyway, it is too late for that option, because we are there now—we have arrived.

What will happen when the water level drops to the point where saltwater incursion starts from both sides and Adelaide's supply is switched off or, as the member for Finnis said, when blue-green algae comes in? It is already happening at Morgan; I believe the salt levels have doubled in recent weeks. What are we going to do when we cannot pump water from the River Murray?

The Hon. R.J. McEwen: What's your suggestion?

Mr VENNING: How do we cope, minister for primary industries?

The Hon. R.J. McEwen interjecting:

Mr VENNING: Well, there are options. With proper use, Adelaide hopefully has 10 to 12 months in its reservoirs. What about the other two pumping stations on the River Murray: Morgan, which supplies the Iron Triangle, Port Pirie, Whyalla and Port Augusta? What are the options there if we cannot pump the River Murray? There are three reservoirs that I know of in that scheme: Bundaleer, Beetaloo and Baroota. I do not know what position they are in to supply three cities. I very much doubt that they could cope with that, and I do not know what the answer is there. Also, there is the Swan Reach pumping station which, of course, supplies the Barossa Valley. If that was not able to operate, we have options in the Para and Warren reservoirs but, again, what are the logistics of being able to turn around the systems and being able to pump water directly from these? And I think in that instance we would have a problem with filtering water because the filtration plant is at Swan Reach. So, all this, and the government still prevaricates in relation to what it should and should not do. It just hopes it will rain—as do we all—and we now have to go into crisis management.

I agree with Professor Cullen that we have to have several options—not just one, in case one fails. I believe we should have put in a desalination plant at the same time Western Australia did, because theirs is now operating. It should be our final fallback position. In other words, it would supply enough water for Adelaide to drink and emergency supplies—for drinking and basic ablutions, nothing else. That is what we should have put in so that Adelaide will always have enough minimal water to live and carry out ablutions and very little else, but we do not have that. We do not have that fallback position. There is no reason this drought cannot go into a third year or even a fourth.

In fact, if you read the Bible and believe history, back in the days of Joseph and the pharaohs, the famine was seven years, and there are those amongst us who believe that could happen—a seven year famine, not a drought, and that is pretty frightening. A couple of nights ago I picked up the Bible and found the story and read the whole thing entirely from the Bible. It is there for us all to read, and it is historic and actually happened. To read what happened back then is a very sobering thing. The Egyptians prepared themselves, through the wisdom of Joseph, and stored grain in the time of plenty and, when the famine came, they had enough to supply their own needs as well as the needs of those around them. Of course, that is why the Israelites went to Egypt.

We should have been doing the same thing, and we have not been doing that in Australia. Farmers over the years have always stored their hay and grain in barns for these times. We do not do that any more. It is not encouraged. I have said in the house before that somehow the minister for primary industries ought to be doing things such as encouraging farmers to store the fodder. There used to be tax incentives to do that, but not any more. It is not his fault, but we should be doing things like that. So we should prepare ourselves so that in times of great shortage we have grain stored in our barns. I certainly support the motion and commend the member for Hammond on his representations regarding the River Murray. I certainly feel for him, because it is mainly his electorate that is affected.

Debate adjourned on motion of the Hon. S.W. Key.