

GRIEVANCE DEBATE – April 3, 2008

MURRAY-DARLING BASIN

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond) (15:11): At this moment, when so many government personnel (federal and state) are congratulating themselves on the recent cross-border agreement on management of the Murray-Darling Basin, I would like members to pause a moment and reflect on the year 1981, which was the year that the Murray Mouth closed over for the first time. Over-allocation was rampant, and no-one appeared to have any control let alone commonsense. Arguments about the management had raged since the turn of the century, with everyone judging the situation from their own parochial point of view. The river was being torn apart by greed and ignorance.

Another thing that happened in 1981 was reported in *The News* on 28 January by a young journalist, Randall Ashbourne, who was later to become much better known in South Australian political circles. Mr Ashbourne had toured the river from Wentworth down to Murray Bridge; and in his travels he met two men who were passionate and very outspoken about the state of things.

One was Jack Edey, who had lived on the river at Karadoc in Victoria's Sunraysia district for the past 58 years. Jack told Ashbourne about the massive underground sea stretching from Morgan and Blanchetown all the way back to Shepparton. This 43,000 square kilometre body of salt water lay below the river. Its salinity, Jack said, was 20,000 parts per million in 1967, but by 1981 it had climbed to 48,000 parts per million.

Furthermore, he claimed that the level was rising, forcing some five million tonnes of salt a year into the river. This is not news, and neither is the damnation of the authorities in stating 'the states keep fighting amongst themselves and the commission is toothless'.

The other man was Dudley Marrows, who operated a fruit block near the river between Wentworth and Mildura. Dudley had been a thorn in the side of the New South Wales government for years. He lodged literally hundreds of objections to the granting of more irrigation licences along the Murray-Darling, drawing much criticism and abuse.

Dudley was not alone in his battle. Many others saw the wisdom of his actions, especially when he put his money where his mouth was and converted his entire irrigation system from overhead sprinklers to under-tree drippers. This was done to prevent the high salinity from burning the foliage, but it had the secondary benefit of greatly improving water efficiency. Mr Marrow said then that authorities should have known 10 years before that salinity was becoming a serious problem and should have encouraged irrigators to use better methods.

He had an even bigger gripe with the then Wran government in New South Wales—funny how that name keeps turning up, like a bad penny! Dudley was, to quote from Ashbourne's article, even angrier about the Wran government's efforts to divert water from the Upper Darling onto massive cotton plantations.

Interestingly, Ashbourne claimed that one of the officials asked not to be named in any report because he had been told, 'Shut up, or else', after condemning Mr Wran's attitude to new Upper Darling irrigation licences. Some things never change.

Why do I raise this now? Because in the euphoria of last week's big announcement, there is the risk that everyone goes off the boil—like being three goals up with five minutes to play and easing back, only to lose the game by a point. The situation for thousands of people around the Lower Lakes is critical now. Talk of three years for real effect from this new management body might not seem like a long time in the context of how long the problem has been looming, but let me remind all members and all South Australians that the situation has never been this bad. The only reason the Murray mouth has not remained closed in the last few years is because millions of dollars have been spent on dredging it.

While we all look forward to better days and better management of the whole river system, some things cannot wait. It is truly disturbing to hear how the tone of voice drops when Premier Rann, Minister Maywald and Federal Minister Wong are asked about the Lower Lakes. There seems to be resignation that one of Australia's most internationally-significant natural features is already beyond salvation.

We cannot let that happen. Who amongst us, be it politician, parent or member of the general public, wants to be the one to have to say to our grandchildren, 'Yes, that happened on my watch. You should have seen it 20 years ago.'

While we wait for this new body to take shape and grow teeth, we must ensure that one of the main objectives is not lost in the meantime. So, it is timely to remember how long this problem has been around and how hard others have fought for the sort of justice and equity that we hope the new agreement may bring in the future. We owe it to our forebears to succeed, as well as to our descendants.