

MURRAY-DARLING BASIN

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI [6.27 p.m.]: I raise an issue of grave concern to a huge number of citizens across State boundaries who live and work in the Murray-Darling Basin. These people directly rely on the basin for their livelihoods; they number two million and make up 10 per cent of the population of this country. As an irrigator, a farmer, a member of Parliament and the duty member of the Legislative Council for Murray-Darling, Murrumbidgee, Albury and Wagga Wagga, I have been approached by a large number of citizens, businesses, councils and industry and agricultural sector representatives who are all concerned about the future of the Murray-Darling under the Murray-Darling Basin Authority. They are concerned because the authority is presently engaged in the most significant water reform the nation has seen, and all indications to date suggest that the authority is minded to conduct its business in the best interests of the environment and foreign instruments, rather than the best interests of the two million people directly dependant upon the Murray-Darling.

People in the cities, who are not among the 10 per cent who rely on the Murray-Darling, should also be concerned, for that 10 per cent of the population represents a great percentage of the primary producers in this country who not only fill the stomachs of city people but also, by underpinning the service economy in this country, directly fill their wallets as well. It is all very well for people away from the Murray-Darling who do not feel themselves connected to it to applaud the release of more water for the environment, but if that remit for the basin authority is not handled wisely, city people will find themselves not only out of pocket but, worse, eating foodstuffs grown in countries that have nowhere near the same standards on which our growers pride themselves.

If the authority is not wise in its handling of the reforms, large numbers of factories and other businesses reliant upon water will also close, and in these times of free trade and globalisation they will invariably move offshore, exporting Australian jobs. The Murray-Darling Basin covers 14 per cent of Australia's landmass and accounts for 35 per cent of our agricultural production, which is a very significant contribution to the national economy. At a time of intense international financial turmoil, we in Australia should be doing everything we can to keep ourselves out of trouble. That includes taking a cautionary, if not precautionary, approach on a number of policy fronts concerning primary production in Australia.

Coming out of a drought and suffering years of policies that forced farmers to work on a level playing field, competing against numerous countries whose agricultural sectors are propped up by a raft of subsidies, has pushed our farmers to the very brink of survival. The idea that water entitlements and licences could see reductions of between 30 per cent and 50 per cent will be devastating to this important sector and the large number of industries, citizens and communities who rely on the Murray-Darling. I urge all members, State and Federal, to think

very carefully about what will happen with the Murray-Darling in the near future. We need to protect the environment and the river, but we must remember the huge numbers of families, industries and cities that also need the river for their very livelihoods. We will not do the nation any favours by destroying our agricultural capacity.

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The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI [10.06 p.m.]: Tonight I welcome the incoming Gillard Government and I congratulate the Independents who helped to deliver that Government. While many expected the Independents to side with the Liberal-Nationals Coalition, in reality the Independents recognised that Labor is the better option for rural and regional Australia. Their decision does not surprise me and that is one of the reasons why I am a member of Country Labor. In welcoming the recent decision of Mr Oakeshott and Mr Windsor I reinforce also my support for improving the conditions and the future of regional and rural New South Wales. Members would be aware that I have spoken on many occasions about the pressing needs of rural New South Wales.

On 18 May I voiced alarm about the future of water supplies in the Murray-Darling Catchment. I have read a lot of analyses that reports fears from urban citizens about resources being allocated to rural and regional Australia at their expense. The Murray-Darling Catchment is an example of the exact opposite where urban people would strip away the livelihoods of their country counterparts. I emphasise to the 90 per cent of Australians that are urbanised that they should not have these fears, for every dollar invested in rural and regional Australia is an investment supporting the high standard of living in our urban towns and cities. I reiterate that point as I fear that Australians who live in cities fail to realise the importance of rural Australia. At around 10 per cent of the population, those who work away from our urban centres in minerals and agriculture are responsible for 60 per cent of the wealth of this nation. These people make the wealth on which so many others rely for their existence.

As I said in my speech on 18 May, not only do we put food in your stomachs but also we put dollars in your wallets. That is also why, as I said in that speech, we are concerned about any government closing down the Murray-Darling Catchment. Closing down the Murray-Darling is an easy, feel-good measure that obviously is easy to sell to people who are so removed from the primary production of this country that they do not realise their own material gain from the agriculture and enterprise that occurs there. But, in the end, the environmental benefits will not be worth the pain and the suffering.

This is because every ounce of food that is not grown in the Murray-Darling will have to come from somewhere else and it should be realised by now that somewhere else will invariably be from overseas. So not only will we ship into third world countries the environmental degradation that invariably comes from agriculture, more than offsetting any good we might hope to achieve here, but the food we then ship back will have a vastly increased carbon footprint and, perhaps worse, will lead to localised food shortages in the country of origin.

I am absolutely certain that these are not outcomes that the average Australian would like to see. Beyond significantly closing down the agricultural capacity of Australia and placing our food security at risk, something that has not occurred here since the First Fleet, we will be offshoring our environmental damage to countries less able than ourselves to deal with it. Again, I believe that people who actually put their minds to the task would agree that this is not a good outcome for anyone. I believe that rural and regional Australia is about to see investment on a national scale and, along with the widespread breaking of the drought, I believe that we will see good times back in the bush.

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The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI [10.26 p.m.]: Again I speak for many within the Murray Darling Basin to raise concerns with the Murray Darling Basin Authority and about the Act from which the authority draws its powers. A concern for many within the basin is that international treaties are being used as a pretext to allow faceless bureaucrats to usurp Australia's sovereignty. It is feared that through the Water Act some bureaucrats are hoping to appease foreign powers, and the masters of those foreign instruments, to secure future positions on the United Nations. Those concerns are hard to dismiss, given the incredible impacts the authority will have on the property rights of a large number of citizens, and the employment and security of many others arising from the exercise of those property rights.

It is now generally conceded that the 800 job-loss figure put forward by the basin authority is baseless—indeed, that is conceded by the authority. More worrying for me is the concession made by the authority when it told Federal water Minister Tony Burke when the new Cabinet was appointed that the Act focused solely on the environment instead of the impact that cutting water entitlements would have on regional communities. When I read the Act I see not only a great deal of direction regarding the need to take social and economic impacts into account, but also a very clear direction that the "national interest" must be met. Indeed, the objects of the Water Act state:

Section 3. The objects of this Act are:

- (a) To enable the Commonwealth, in conjunction with the Basin States, to manage the Basin water resources in the

national interest: and

(b) to give effect to relevant international agreements (to the extent to which those agreements are relevant to the use and management of the Basin water resources) and, in particular, to provide for special measures, in accordance with those agreements, to address the threats to the Basin water resources;

Clearly, as the Act recognises, "national interest" and "international agreements" are two very different things. The Act is clear that it envisages both the national interest and giving effect to international agreements. Yet when I examine the work of the Murray-Darling Basin Authority, it appears to me that the authority believes that giving effect to international agreements is in the national interest. I find that alarming, especially as the authority appears to put international agreements relating to flora and fauna ahead of international agreements that protect human beings. In that regard, I refer to Article 17 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states:

(1) Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.

(2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

Given the authority's high regard for treaties and foreign instruments and given the fact that its work is fundamentally about removing property rights from water licence holders, I am amazed that not once has it referred to Article 17. I inform members that many within the Murray-Darling Basin feel that they are being treated like feral animals, a blight upon the environment, and a pest whose numbers and impact need to be controlled. To date the behaviour of, and indeed statements from, the authority have done little to allay their concern.

It is not good enough for the authority to simply pay lip-service to the significance of overallocation of the resource having occurred because of the mismanagement by authorities, and then ride roughshod over the rights and security of hundreds of thousands of Australians. A large number of Australians are insisting that it is time for the Act and the Murray-Darling Basin Authority to be reviewed. The national interest and social and economic impacts need to be taken into account. We all recognise that the environment needs to be protected. However, it appears that only some of us believe that it should not be protected at any cost.