



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**COMMITTEES**

**Standing Committee on  
Environment and Heritage**

**Report**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 26 February 2001**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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# SPEECH

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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Billson, Bruce, MP

**Source** House  
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**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Mr BILLSON** (Dunkley) (12.59 pm)—The *Coordinating catchment management* report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage tabled today is a very useful look forward at tackling sustainability for our country. The terms of reference we worked to recognised a number of things: (1) there are significant catchment related challenges that we as a nation must face; (2) we have had mixed results from the existing structures and systems; (3) integrated catchment management has been embraced as the only logical way forward to tackle these issues; and (4) how we embrace catchment management in a way not simply to guard against further degradation but to actually use those tools to restore the quality of our natural systems. I share with the previous speaker, the member for Holt, the frustration over the finger-pointing that has gone on and the opportunities that have been lost, but there are some reasons for that, and these are tackled fairly and squarely in the report.

In my view, the report could have been subtitled 'Vital approaches for vital communities'. The Constitution apportions jurisdictional responsibility for natural systems management, but that does not guarantee effective action and the essential outcomes that are required. This report seeks to work within the framework of our Federation to propose some new structures, some new, more rigorous intergovernmental relationships, some planning and reporting tools and, above all, some accountability—a framework to improve the prospect for vital action, resourcing certainty, localised management and transparent reporting against shared priorities and responsibilities. These vital approaches will take some courage to implement, but to not face up to the natural resource challenges and the creeping atrophy eating away at too many regional communities amounts to failing these communities.

I talk about 'vital communities' not only in the sense of the importance of these communities but also in the sense of communities that are full of life, that are invigorated, that are animated, that are optimistic about the future—communities where their natural systems are the foundation of their economic and social life. Let me put it another way: if essential natural systems are degraded, what are the drivers of these communities? Why will people invest in these communities? Why will people choose to raise their families in these communities? What is the reason for the community being there in the first place if the natural systems they depend upon are so degraded that they cannot sustainably support agricultural production, biodiversity conservation, living standards or basic services that their citizens depend upon, such as water. This report seeks to tackle that head-on.

As we travelled around Australia, we asked some difficult questions. We asked local government whether, if they had a few extra tens of thousands of dollars or even millions of dollars, that money would go towards natural systems management? Sadly, too often we were told that there were other, more pressing priorities. Yet those of us on the committee believe that, unless we get our natural systems restored, these other, lesser priorities in these local communities will not matter, as the only economic base they will have will be people trying to restore the degradation that has been left to them by earlier generations.

Proposals in the report include the formulation of a national catchment management authority, the drafting of catchment management legislation, setting management principles clearly before all the parties involved, creating performance standards, looking at the difficult question of property rights, setting up an environmental auditor, addressing reporting processes and working with accredited plans so that we know that the resources are there and that they are being spent wisely. Once the \$1.5 billion in the Natural Heritage Trust Fund has been expended, I am concerned that some citizens will say, 'Did we get value for money?' Sadly, through cost-shifting from states and territories, through other jurisdictions not accepting their responsibilities, we have not been able to leverage those resources in the way that was first envisaged.

**Mr BILLSON**—You can tell from the behaviour of those opposite that they are not that interested in sustainability. It has not cracked it as one of the four Beazley pillars. I can understand that: they were not interested in it in government and they are certainly not interested in it in opposition. If anything is going to be done to look

after our natural systems, it will take a coalition government to do it, and this report provides a useful blueprint for the future.

**Mr Melham**—One less speech from you!

**Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Nehl)**—There will be a few less from you if you don't be quiet, Member for Banks. Does the member for Page wish to move a motion in connection with the report to enable it to be debated on a future occasion?