



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

**LAKE EYRE BASIN
INTERGOVERNMENTAL
AGREEMENT BILL 2001**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Wednesday, 4 April 2001

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Billson, Bruce, MP

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Mr BILLSON (Dunkley) (10.31 am)—I am delighted to support the Lake Eyre Basin Intergovernmental Agreement Bill 2001 before the House. The bill is small in its size—fewer than a dozen lines—but it represents an enormous step forward for what is one-seventh of our continent. This bill covers an intergovernmental agreement that goes to the management of one of the most important geographical features on our continent. It covers some 1,170,000 square kilometres of Central Australia and includes major rivers, all of which end in Lake Eyre, making it—as has been covered by the previous speaker—the world's fifth-largest lake that has no outflow by surface stream or seepage and, therefore, is known as a terminal lake. The water ends up in this basin.

Mr Deputy Speaker Jenkins, you would well know from your time with me on the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment, Recreation and the Arts, as it was back in October 1996, that we did a lot of work on managing Australia's world heritage area. The whole process that concerned the 1993 proposal to nominate the Lake Eyre Basin for World Heritage listing was very much a part of our work. It informed many of our deliberations and gave us a clear working example and study of how not to do things. In 1993—some would say it was suspiciously close to a federal election—an environment minister looking to shore up some votes in the Labor seat of Kingston thought that suggesting that the Lake Eyre Basin be put on the World Heritage List was a good measure to take. It was a good idea—sort of. The only thing was that the people who had managed the area—those very stakeholders and land-holders who had so managed the natural systems of the Lake Eyre Basin to ensure that its qualities, its biodiversity and the importance of its rivers, wetlands and flood plains and all of the abundant flora and fauna that is in this basin had been conserved and preserved alongside them, forming a living for themselves and their communities—had not been consulted. All those people who had done the hard yards to ensure that the Lake Eyre Basin was deserving of the highest level of environmental recognition—no-one had talked to them. And then, out of the blue, in 1993 came this idea from then Minister Kelly, 'Let's list the Lake Eyre Basin as a world heritage area.' Understandably, that caused an enormous amount of resentment from the local community.

I would like to pay tribute to the member for Grey, who is with us today, who was the local member for this community in 1993. He was a tower of strength at that time when the local community felt that Canberra had ridden in and ridden roughshod over the top of them, told them what was good for their community and what was good for their environment and the natural systems that they for generations had conserved, managed and ensured had all of the qualities that warranted the highest level of recognition. To his credit, the member for Grey was able to work with the local community and support their efforts to come up with an organic management solution—not one imposed from Canberra; not one that had all the mysteries of not knowing quite what the listing would mean; not one where the announcement to pursue World Heritage listing was not preceded by any work on what the management arrangements should be, how the locals would be involved, how the measures that would be needed to support such a listing would be financed or even what the role of the regular land-holder would be. None of that preceded the 1993 announcement by the then Labor environment minister. To his credit, the member for Grey worked with the local community and generated and supported their efforts to ensure local management and ownership of the solution of how best to conserve this very important part of our biodiversity. It was very fitting that late last year he was there representing the Commonwealth at the Birdsville signatory ceremony. So, on behalf of your local constituents, Member for Grey, congratulations—this is an important day for you and an important day for your local community.

We often hear of communities deciding to become nuclear-free zones. It is sort of like a 'cone of silence' that will come over the community if something nuclear—I am not talking about the Mir spacecraft, but something more hazardous—was coming their way, and they would be okay. In this case, the Lake Eyre Basin is a chemical-free zone. There are no chemicals in the river systems; there is no chemical degradation in the lands, in the soils or in the flood plains because that is the way the locals have managed it for generations.

What we are doing today is actually underwriting that chemical-free status by a management arrangement that brings the very best out of our federal system. We have actually got an agreement and an intergovernmental

framework that has stated what roles each level of government will play and that has identified the process for decision making to ensure that it is by a unanimous vote of the ministerial forum, so that all levels of government need to agree before something is moved forward. We also have a consultative framework where all of those stakeholders are involved, where land-holders are very much at the heart of the solution and not viewed as a threat or a problem to the local environment. They are wholly supportive of this, because they have recognised the environmental and natural systems values that are so important to their livelihoods and whose conservation is so important not only for their biodiversity value but also for their productive value.

We are now seeing pastoralists in the Lake Eyre area marketing free-range organic beef into Asia. Here is a chemical-free zone supported by institutional structures delivering a commercial advantage for pastoralists. Out of what was grief, terror and uncertainty in 1993 has come certainty, sensible management arrangements, relationships between the key stakeholders, a funding arrangement that sees all of the protective measures put in place and new opportunities to underline the importance of the Lake Eyre Basin. There is free-range organic beef from the Lake Eyre Basin—from the electorate of the member for Grey, from those people whom he so valiantly supported during those dark days in 1993. At that time, as they read about the future of their region in newspapers, they were not quite sure what was going to happen to them. We now have free-range organic beef going into Asia.

In this case, it is not really the land-holders working with the government; it is actually the government working with the land-holders. The land-holders have set about formulating a management regime that works best for the biodiversity values of this huge area of our continent as well as for their own interests as land-holders. As was mentioned earlier, Queensland is developing complementary legislation; it is still in the early stages of that. South Australia is well advanced with its complementary legislation, which has bipartisan support in the upper house. South Australia is almost matching the progress that the Commonwealth has made.

The Lake Eyre Basin includes a multitude of land uses, including pastoralism, mining, tourism, oil and gas exploration and production, conservation and Aboriginal activities and important sites. The variety of these activities creates a fascinating diversity, and also some issues when it comes to protecting the area and conserving its natural systems and the values that I mentioned earlier. There are two key areas in the Lake Eyre Basin which are already on the register of the National Estate. As we heard earlier, in the past there have been proposals for World Heritage listing of parts of the basin.

The Howard government has recognised the importance of the basin in terms of conservation values but has also recognised the need to involve the community of the Lake Eyre Basin and recognise the wide variety of activities in the Lake Eyre Basin region. The start of this century is a time when all governments—all thinking governments—are recognising that biodiversity conservation has to involve the community. It cannot be something that is left solely to governments. We the government, using the money of you the taxpayers, cannot go around buying up every bit of land that happens to have high conservation value. We have to work with the people that know that land best and can secure these biodiversity and conservation outcomes in conjunction with some of the other goals that are quite understandably pursued by land-holders. This is a terrific case study of how this is done.

The Howard government, through the support and advocacy of the member for Grey, established the Lake Eyre Basin Coordinating Group, with funding—also secured by the member for Grey—from the Natural Heritage Trust. If I were living in South Australia, I would probably want to live in the electorate of the member for Grey. This is excellent work. The group's functions include the creation of ecological and economic sustainability proposals while also providing a forum for community participation and, importantly, communication with governments. The result of this cooperation between the Commonwealth, South Australian and Queensland governments and the stakeholders—including the pastoralists, the mining and petroleum interests, the tourism representatives, indigenous groups and land care organisations—was the development of a regional catchment management strategy. The Lake Eyre Basin intergovernmental agreement was signed in Birdsville on 21 October. That represented a victory for commonsense and cooperation over blind ideology and the omnipotence of governments telling local communities what is best for them. It was very fitting that the member for Grey was there to participate in that process.

Rather than the government in Canberra dictating to the community and imposing its will on the terms on which the Lake Eyre Basin would be managed, the Howard government has chosen to work with and alongside the community, supporting the community to reach an agreement that achieves an acceptable outcome from all sides. It secures those conservation and biodiversity goals, it clarifies the future, it provides some certainty about

the management arrangements for the local stakeholders and it bodes well for a terrific, cooperative, 'working together' future for those in the Lake Eyre region.

The commitment of skill and the understanding of the environmental issues at a local level is inspiring. How can we draw out that experience of generation after generation of local inhabitants and their insight into the way the Lake Eyre Basin operated other than by involving the local community? The \$1½ million secured by the member for Grey through the Natural Heritage Trust has enabled community organisations to do some great work in this large area, one-seventh of our country. The Commonwealth will be the first jurisdiction to actually pass—hopefully today—the legislation that has been proposed by the agreement.

As I said at the beginning, this is fewer than a dozen lines of legislation. The real workhorse in the package we are proposing today is the governmental agreement itself. It outlines a whole range of things that need to be known in advance before a local community can feel confident about entering into this sort of relationship with these sorts of complementary goals. The legislation implements the best practice that we sought to identify and articulate in this work, aimed at how we could better manage our world heritage areas. The key thing out of today is that we can secure in a cooperative way the outcomes people seek through World Heritage listing—yet not even have a World Heritage listing. We can secure the values that are important, that are of international significance, through cooperation, engagement and involvement of the local community and therefore we can take everybody on this journey to preserve and better manage one of the most precious parts of our country. I commend this bill to the House and commend the member for Grey for his many years of work to achieve this outstanding outcome for his community.