



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS**

**Water**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 11 March 2002**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

**Date** Monday, 11 March 2002  
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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Billson, Bruce, MP

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

**Mr BILLSON** (Dunkley) (1.34 pm)—I would like to lend my support for the motion moved by the member for Mallee today as a friend and someone who shares a passion for the Wimmera-Mallee pipeline. It seeks to save water for western Victoria, to deliver environmental flow benefits to other river systems in Victoria and to give the South Australians a break. South Australians, frankly, need a break. I was reading in today's edition of the *Australian* the response of state governments to the recommendation for environmental flows through the Murray River system. The Australian Conservation Foundation land and water coordinator, Tim Fisher, who is not readily known for gratuitous pieces of kind words on behalf of the government, is appealing to all the states that adjoin the Murray River, or are a part of its system, to put aside their differences. He said:

This could be the last chance for the Murray River. We're looking for leadership here, but we're afraid Victoria and NSW may be planning to sabotage a healthy outcome.

That is an independent assessment of where the state of water policy is at. Doesn't it contrast vividly with what the Labor members of parliament are trying to put to you in this House today? The article further stated:

A spokesman for Victorian Environment Minister Sheryl Garbutt said the state Government was 'not prepared to make this kind of decision now'—

The government was not prepared to make a decision about environmental flows in the Murray system. I understand that people in South Australia are a little anxious about that inability to make a decision on what is a difficult issue. What illustrates the difficulty is that, when a number of Liberal and National Party members of parliament talk today about solutions and pathways to tackle this very difficult issue, all we get from the Labor Party is carping—'We've got carp in our river systems; we've got carp'—which is the only policy we have from them on the environment. Mr Thomson, the shadow minister, is following on from Senator Bolkus, the former Labor environment spokesman; he does not offer any ideas; he just has a go at the margins of what is a very difficult issue facing this country.

We all know that healthy natural systems go to the heart of a healthy productive capacity in this country. That is what this debate is seeking to draw out. We know the anthropological influence that exists on our climate and the impact that is having on rainfall. That has a further impact on the river flows and what is available for environmental flows and agricultural production. We know that that is an issue and the government is tackling it. What also needs to be looked at is the regional impact of these changes. The climate is changing and variations in rainfall will affect different parts of our country quite differently. That is why, in this motion, we are looking for more research into these changes in rainfall patterns.

These regional microclimate assessments are required to understand and evaluate the impact climate change is having at a regional level and to understand the consequences of it. Some people might say, 'Gee, this is difficult to handle,' but the cost of not doing something to tackle some of these issues is just as great as the cost of turning our backs on some of these terrific ideas, such as the Wimmera-Mallee pipeline.

*Opposition members interjecting—*

**Mr BILLSON**—Those opposite heckle about the Wimmera-Mallee pipeline. It is clear that the Labor Party is not committed to it, otherwise the state government would have seen fit to get off its backside and back the project. Here is a constructive proposal which is trying to pipe one of the largest earthen distribution systems in the world. It is a simple idea. If more than 90 per cent of the 1,000 megalitres of water being channelled is not reaching its destination and is therefore not productive, that is a grotesque waste of water. Through this project—through piping those earthen channels—we can not only ensure better water quality for productive uses but also guard against waste. The dividend for the Australian community and the environment is that water saved, which can then go into environmental flows. That is why this is another constructive and practical measure.

Those opposite also saw fit to criticise the Leader of the National Party. He is putting forward a new approach—one on information, property rights, incentives and partnerships. What is wrong with that? Why is the Labor

Party criticising that? It simply has no grasp of the importance of this issue. Property rights are an important signal for investment. Over the years, successive state governments have overallocated water. Some people are given an expectation that they will be able to get certain volumes of water and, unless there is a torrential downpour in the season, they will never be able to get that amount of water. We need to work with the people who hold those water entitlements to make them real, fungible and bankable. Then if they are promised three gigs of water a season, they are guaranteed to get the three gigs. And if we have a better than average season of rainfall and have greater flows in our river systems, there is more there for the environment and there is more there that we can put into the market to draw from the market the price it is prepared to pay for that scarce resource. There is a pathway to be followed to secure this vision. I support this motion and commend the government for looking for ways forward. *(Time expired)*