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GOVERNOR-GENERAL'S SPEECH

Address-in-Reply

SPEECH

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SPEECH

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Speaker Zappia, Tony, MP	Question No.

Mr ZAPPIA (Makin) (6.55 pm)—On 28 September, the Governor-General delivered her address to the 43rd Parliament in which she outlined the government's national agenda on environment, economic and social policy. The issues that the Governor-General referred to in her speech are all issues of the utmost importance to this nation. Our ability to successfully manage all of those issues and to deliver on the commitments to the Australian people and the expectations of the Australian people are, I believe, underpinned by how successfully we manage climate change and population growth.

It is my view that, because of the mismanagement of both climate change and population growth, we are facing many of the problems which have become national priorities today. Importantly, climate change and population growth are very much linked. Both are also underpinned by greed—often disguised as economic growth and economic prosperity. There is considerable evidence that population growth is contributing significantly to climate change, which in turn is contributing to population shifts and ultimate sustainability. Notably, it seems that population growth was not on the agenda at the climate change conference in Copenhagen and, if it was, there was very little said about it. If human activity is causing climate change, as the overwhelming scientific evidence concludes, then global population growth will inevitably add to climate change and make climate change adoption measures considerably more difficult. Effective climate change and population growth strategies are the keys to resolving many of the issues which today confront governments around the world and which have largely been caused by a failure to manage growth and ensure that it is sustainable.

I will begin by summarising some key matters relating to climate change. Firstly, regardless of all the protesters, the conspiracy theorists, the extremists and those who simply do not want to accept that climate change is real, the overwhelming scientific evidence from credible scientists and scientific organisations around the world, across a range of scientific disciplines, confirms that the world's climate is changing, that we are not simply experiencing normal weather cycles and that the problem is serious. If the scientists are right, it is indeed not only the greatest moral, environmental and economic challenge of our time but also the most difficult global challenge ever faced by mankind because it requires a global strategy and, therefore, agreement between countries with different needs, different aspirations, different levels of ability, different agendas and different objectives. Climate change is an incredibly complex matter on which to reach agreement. Not surprisingly, the first attempt to reach agreement on it at Copenhagen had only limited success. However, the Copenhagen conference should never been seen as a failure because, firstly, never before have 192 countries of the world come together to discuss climate change; and, secondly, there was no disagreement that climate change is real and that mankind is a major contributor to it. Those are two critical points for those who wish to criticise Copenhagen as a failure.

Climate change is real and it is already costing nations around the world, including Australia, hundreds of billions of dollars each year in responding to the unprecedented number of natural disasters, ranging from floods to fires through to tornadoes, cyclones, sea surges and tsunamis. The damage caused by each event is immeasurable. Billions of dollars which could otherwise be used to provide the very services that communities are screaming out for are soaked up in repairing the damage caused, in addition to the loss of productivity for months and sometimes years. Consider what we could have done for our health system, for people with mental health issues or other disabilities, with the \$13 billion that has been set aside to restore the Murray-Darling Basin. Consider how much more prosperous our nation would have been if the Murray-Darling Basin had been in full or near-full production over the last decade. Consider how many services could have been funded if millions of dollars each year were not being diverted to assist with the natural disasters that are becoming regular occurrences.

To those people who remain sceptical about climate change and still believe that we are simply seeing natural weather pattern cycles and do not believe that greenhouse gas emissions are contributing to climate change I say: research the issue with an open mind. I noticed that only yesterday there was some media commentary with respect to a book, *Merchants of Doubt*, written by Professor Naomi Oreskes and Erik M Conway. The book exposes the campaign being run by the climate change sceptics as being run by the same people who previously ran the campaigns for tobacco companies challenging the dangers of cigarette smoking, the campaign challenging

the existence of the ozone hole in the atmosphere and its link to carbon fluorocarbons, the campaign challenging the effects of acid rain and the campaign that caused the delay in regulating DDT in the USA. In summary, climate change and changing weather patterns will result in population shifts. It is also causing food and water shortages, which in turn will lead to an escalation in international conflicts.

I turn to the matter of population sustainability. I do not know what the ideal population should be for Australia or what a sustainable population for Australia should be, but I do know that key social issues, such as stresses in our health system, housing affordability and infrastructure bottlenecks, are all the result of services not keeping up with population growth. We have already fallen well behind in our quest for sustainability. Many of the strategies and policies being implemented now will at best fix the problems of today. As we pour money into addressing today's immediate priorities, demands will continue to grow with population growth. New, unplanned and unforeseen needs will also arise. Yet we have developed an economy that is dependent on growth. Without growth being factored into future budget forecasts, governments will quickly find their budgets unsustainable. At some point, growth will have to stop. What happens to the budgets then?

It is notable that the advocates of a big Australia and global population growth are the sectors that will profit from an increasing population and, therefore, more consumers. These are the industry sectors that are not content with remaining viable. They continuously strive for growth; they continuously strive for more profits—growth and profits which depend on more and more consumers. You only have to look at the major advocates of a big Australia and population increases around the world and you will find that those campaigns are being driven by those who have the most to gain. Those same sectors inevitably, however, leave governments to pick up the social costs associated with that growth. It is all right for them to make the profits, but, when it comes to the problems and the social consequences of the growth, that is a problem for governments. It should not be. It is a problem for all of us, whether it is in this country or on this earth.

Of course we also have industry sectors that argue for population growth because their own growth is dependent on available labour hire. As we all know, it is also the case that having more labour to choose from is a great bargaining tool for keeping wages down. Again it is all about the bottom line for certain industries. Regrettably, each industry sector is focused on its own needs, its own priorities and its own future. Governments, however, have a much broader responsibility.

Population growth is also a major contributing factor in climate change. More houses, more cars, more industry and more construction means more energy requirements and therefore more pollution. More growth also means more destruction of the very environment and the very elements of nature that would ordinarily assist with neutralising the increased pollution. In Australia, population growth has caused the loss of much of Australia's most fertile agricultural land and the flow-on effects to food production. Even with more efficient energy systems, the simple reality is that increased population contributes to increased carbon dioxide emissions. The only beneficiaries of increased population are those who profit from consumption. Regrettably, they do so at the expense of the masses, at the expense of the environment and at the expense of our children and grandchildren. To quote an American saying, 'We do not inherit our land from our forefathers; we borrow it from our children.' We have massive responsibilities to future generations. It is also my view that ultimately the environment will prevail. Regardless of what we do, nature will find a way of correcting itself. The sad reality is that when that happens people—future generations—will be the victims.

I want to speak briefly about a couple of other matters. The first issue is one I have already alluded to and which I link to climate change: the state of the Murray-Darling Basin. To put my comments in context, the Murray-Darling Basin covers one million square kilometres, or one-seventh of the Australian landmass. It contributes 39 per cent of national agricultural production. It includes 30,000 wetlands, of which 16 are Ramsar listed. The average annual inflow into the basin is about 10,000 gegalitres. New South Wales takes about 54 per cent of that, Victoria 34 per cent, South Australia seven per cent and Queensland five per cent.

Under the Australian Constitution, the basin comes under the jurisdiction of the states of Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. An agreement was reached in 1915 in regard to the management of the system. The agreement has been amended and there have been different agreements over the years, but effectively that was the agreement that set the framework. South Australia capped its licences with respect to new licences that were issued in South Australia using South Australia's share of the water in about 1969. Then there was an agreement with New South Wales and Victoria where a cap was placed on the river in those two states as well. In the interim, there was a considerable number of new licences issued by the upstream states, and there was an overallocation—as many would come to refer to it—of the water from the Murray-Darling system.

In 2007 the Commonwealth Water Act was brought in by the Howard government. Under that act, an independent Murray-Darling Basin Authority was to be put in place. There was a subsequent agreement between each of the states and the ACT and the federal government on 3 July 2008, which effectively transferred management of the system to the federal government, and the work of the authority began.

The point I make about all this is that the Murray-Darling Basin system is critical to the future of this country. Some three million Australians depend on it for their drinking water supplies, in addition to the agricultural production and our food security. We know that the system has been badly managed. We also know that that was compounded by over a decade of drought. But we also know that we cannot continue to operate and manage the system as it was in previous times. We know that reform is necessary.

This is reform that will be brought in after almost 100 years of allowing the system to be managed in a particular way. Of course it will not be easy, but it is reform that is absolutely necessary. Whilst there is a lot of political debate taking place right now in respect of how the process is going, it is so important for the future of this country that the political bickering be put aside and we get it right in ensuring that the Murray is environmentally sustainable into the future and the communities that depend on it remain viable.

The work that is being done at the moment by both the authority and the parliament is necessary and, I believe, will ultimately lead to a more sustainable system. I would like to think that this work, which was in essence initiated by the previous government and continued by this government, will have bipartisan goodwill so that we get the best results out of it rather than see it become a political football, as it has been in recent weeks.

Australia, like the rest of the world, faces some very difficult challenges into the future. I appreciate the comments of the member for Pearce, who a moment ago made a similar reflection. If you look at issues around the world—whether they be climate change, population growth, the fragile state of the global economy, food security, global refugees, energy security or the emergence of different superpowers around the world—and then come back to Australia and add to those our own local issues of health reform, housing, Indigenous disadvantage, migration, education, our commitment in Afghanistan and so on, you quickly begin to understand that we have some very serious and difficult challenges ahead of us.

We have just been through an election campaign in this country where quite frankly, like most campaigns of recent times, there was far more politicking than there was consideration as to what the real issues of the future are and consideration given to policy directions for the future of this country. But the issues that we are confronted with are very real and very serious. This government has made a commitment to addressing those issues in a measured and serious way. They will not be easy; they will be very difficult issues, and of course they will be used as political footballs from time to time. The reality is, however, that if they are not addressed, regardless of whether this government or another government is in office in three, six or nine years time, they will be the same issues and they will not be easily dealt with.

It is my view that this parliament was elected by the people of this country to look to the best interests of this nation, and the best interests of this nation are not served by disagreeing on every matter, or opposing every matter, or using every political opportunity that you can, but rather by looking at the policies of the government of the day and seeing how those policies can be improved. I believe that anyone who comes up with policies and strategies that ultimately serve the best interests of this nation will get the support of both this parliament and the broader community. On the contrary, if members of this parliament simply continue to quibble and argue among themselves we will rightly be condemned by the Australian people. I look forward to serving in this parliament over the next three years because I look forward to being part of a government that addresses the serious challenges that confront this nation.