



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Main Committee**

**PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS**

**Murray-Darling Basin**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 21 February 2011**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

**Date** Monday, 21 February 2011  
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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Zappia, Tony, MP

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

**Mr ZAPPIA** (Makin) (11.54 am)—I welcome the opportunity to speak on this matter and I commend the member for Kingston for bringing this matter to the House for debate. Can I say from the outset that nothing could have highlighted the significance and the importance of the Murray-Darling Basin more than the decade-long drought, when you consider that the Murray-Darling Basin is home to some two million Australians, provides essential water needs for almost three million Australians, has some 30,000 wetlands within it, 16 of which are Ramsar listed, and has a world listed site in it as well. It provides, on figures available, anything up to about 75 per cent of the irrigated land in Australia used for growing agricultural products and pastures. Depending on whose figures you want to listen to, figures on its worth to the Australian economy range up to about \$40 billion. All of that was essentially highlighted after a decade of drought because all of those matters came to a head as a result of the basin being impacted by the drought.

I will just respond very briefly to the member for Riverina, because five minutes does not give me a lot of time to speak on the matters I want to address. Can I say: it is as a result of a decade of neglect from the previous government when the signs were clearly on the board that we are in the situation that we are in right now. If there is criticism to be made with respect to the Water Act 2007, let me remind the member for Riverina that it was a previous coalition government that brought that act into this place, and it was supported by the Labor opposition at the time. We are dealing with an act brought in not by this government but by the previous government.

Mr Deputy Speaker Sidebottom, I am a supplementary member of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Australia, of which you are the deputy chair. Can I say in that respect that I commend you on your commitment to getting the plan right. If it takes time to do so then so be it, but we need to get the plan right. I will come back to the issue of uncertainty in a moment as well. As a member of that committee I, along with the member for Riverina, have visited communities right throughout the basin. We still have some more places to go to, but at this stage we have visited communities in South Australia, in Victoria and in New South Wales. We have seen firsthand the devastation caused to those communities as a result of the shortage of water and we have seen firsthand the devastation caused to the environmental areas along the way as well. We know that we have to get the plan right.

With respect to the work of that committee, having listened to the people in those communities and having seen firsthand that devastation, I believe that there are a number of matters that the committee will be guided by. First and foremost, the communities within the basin all depend on the health of the Murray-Darling Basin river system for their survival, and every community has been affected by the drought. Secondly, those same communities depend on a relatively stable water supply for their survival. Thirdly, uncertainty about water availability and water allocations, as the member for Riverina has quite rightly said, is as destructive as the water shortage itself. Uncertainty creates stress and insecurity. Fourthly, communities within the basin understand the social and environmental importance of having a sustainable system. In fact, it has been my observation that the majority of farmers have a deep commitment to protecting our environment. Fifthly, Murray-Darling Basin farmers and Murray-Darling Basin communities have in recent years made massive investments in irrigation efficiencies, and I acknowledge that. Lastly, it is my observation that communities within the Murray-Darling Basin well understand the importance of developing a sustainable water plan for the basin and that, now that a process has begun, we must see it through and get it right.

I want to talk about getting it right, the uncertainty and why it is important that we continue with the process and not delay. It is clear to me that the opposition are now taking a strategy such that they would like to see the process delayed, because the Leader of the Opposition has indicated that they would defer the strategic water buybacks that we know are also essential as part of a plan of getting it right. It is essential that we get it right now because, if we do not, that uncertainty will continue. If we do not, we know that weather patterns will continue to be uncertain. And, if we do not, we know that it will not be long before we are back to where we started at the beginning of the inquiry—that is, going into another drought, possibly as bad as the last decade of drought. We have to get it right, and to do so we cannot afford to waste time on it and defer the water buybacks or defer

the work of the committee. I commend this motion and I believe it is important that the House continues with the inquiry that is currently underway.