



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Centenary of the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area

SPEECH

Monday, 11 February 2013

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Ley, Sussan, MP

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Ms LEY (Farrer) (11:21): I am pleased to support my colleague the member for Riverina and commend his work in representative politics around water irrigation communities and the people in his electorate that matter so much. I look forward, following the remarks of the member opposite, to the government supporting this motion when we vote on it in the House.

The value of agricultural production in my electorate of Farrer, part of the Murray-Darling Basin, is over \$3 billion. The value of irrigated agriculture production is \$1.8 billion—that is in the Murray and the Lower Darling. Those figures represent an enormous contribution to Australia's bottom line. People quote these figures, and I do too. We should also understand that they can increase, that we can do better and that we can, as farming methods improve, become much more productive.

When the national debate turns to water and the politics of water, members who represent irrigated agriculture get very frustrated. I would like to go back to the beginning and quote some lines from Henry Lawson, who in the last years of his life spent some time in the Yanco irrigation area near Leeton, a prohibition zone. In his famous poem, which he revised at that time, called *Up The Country*, he wrote:

I am back from up the country, up the country where I went

Seeking for the Southern poets' land whereon to pitch my tent;

I have shattered many idols out along the dusty track,

Burnt a lot of fancy verses—and I'm glad that I am back.

I believe the Southern poets' dream will not be realised

Till the plains are irrigated and the land is humanised.

The way the early explorers and poets would have seen inland Australia in the part of the southern Murray-Darling Basin that I represent would be nothing like it is today. Sometimes I think that there are people in Australia who do not understand the problem and would take us back to 13-inch rainfalls, scrub country, sheep and, clearly, towns which would be a fraction of their size.

The member for Lyons quoted Peter Cullen, whom I have a lot of respect for and have met many times during the debates on water in this place. The irony is that, when we talk about the politics of water, the national plan as put forward by John Howard and supported by me as a member in this place was about taking the politics out of water. Unfortunately, that has not happened. The plan as it stands is very much expressed in terms of flows at the end of the system in the Lower Lakes. While I have no issue with determining relevant levels of water at that point in the system, I do know that it is a political imperative that has been described by the minister instead of a complete, holistic picture of environmental watering. They say, 'We will deliver this much water to the bottom of the system eight or nine years out of 10.' That is a political objective; so the government's plan has been distorted from the very beginning.

I commend the motion to the House. I place on record in the strongest possible terms that the food-processing industry is vital to the people I represent; that value adding is something that we can do; and that the closer to the source of the primary product you do the value adding the more jobs and industry you get and the more efficient that activity.

The Prime Minister gave a speech in a summit in Melbourne on 3 May 2012 and made a commitment to strengthen irrigation. I have seen no evidence of that. As the government responds to this motion by the member for Riverina, wouldn't it be good if the Prime Minister reconfirmed that commitment and talked about what it really means, in

light of a very flawed Murray-Darling Basin Plan, to genuinely support the farmers and the food producers and the communities that represent irrigation in Australia today. As my colleague has said, our irrigation industry fulfils its role as the food bowl of Asia. When you consider what we could produce, how we could export that product and how we could jump up to a completely different level, the figures I quoted at the beginning of this speech could become history and we would have a much higher value of irrigated agricultural production. I support the motion before the House and I look forward to the government's enthusiastic response.