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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

MATTERS OF PUBLIC INTEREST

Murray-Darling Basin

SPEECH

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Speaker Joyce, Sen Barnaby	Question No.

Senator JOYCE (Queensland—Leader of The Nationals in the Senate) (13:45): In a matter of days the draft Murray-Darling Basin plan will be announced. This is an issue of utmost importance for Australia. The Murray-Darling Basin is what feeds us. It represents 40 per cent of Australia's agricultural output. It is also 60 per cent of our nation's irrigation. The Murray-Darling Basin is home to 2.1 million people. The biggest city in the Murray-Darling Basin is this one, Canberra. There are other cities that rely on it. Adelaide takes water from it but it is not actually in the basin. Melbourne has a pipeline to it but is not actually in the basin. If it were a state, it would be a mid-range state in our nation.

The thing that drove the work as to the Murray-Darling Basin was the general belief of overallocation, and that was a fact and there had to be water returned to the rivers—that was a fact too. However, if the government gets this wrong, the socioeconomic ramifications will be disastrous and the environmental benefits will be dubious. We have huge concerns about where this government is going with it. We have been waiting for this report. There has been delay after delay after delay and prevarication after prevarication. I think the belief is this: try and get the parliament over and done with before releasing what I would say is going to be the final one of the troika of disasters—the carbon tax, the mining tax and then the Murray-Darling Basin draft.

The first time that the plan was released it got very close to our having riots in Australia. There were burnings of the guide to the draft plan and there were massive meetings by people who obviously had huge concerns about what was going to happen to their town. The primary concern goes beyond the farmer and to the person who owns the motel, the mortgage holder in a regional town—in a Mildura or a Shepparton or a Goondiwindi or a St George—the tyre business, the person who moved to that town for a future and every person pushing a shopping trolley in every supermarket who purchases food. With the carbon tax we drove up the price of power. With a bad Murray-Darling Basin plan we will drive up the price of food. It will be yet another assault on the standard of living of the people of Australia as driven, by all intents and purposes, by the power of the Greens.

The draft Murray-Darling Basin plan will be released on 28 November. There will be a 20-week consultation period. The Murray-Darling Basin Authority has not released any dates for public consultation but has committed to hosting meetings in regional towns and metropolitan areas. It is not yet clear what the format of these meetings will be, whether they will be open and public, and whether the minister will be there. I do not think the minister was at any of the others. We do hope that the person who is actually responsible for this matter is there. The Basin Communities Association will hold a meeting at Griffith on 4 December 2011. We hope that many people will turn up to that. We can provide a Senate inquiry through December if required.

What we can glean thus far is that what the MDBA are going to do now, turning from what virtually caused the riots, means that the difference between those two amounts is about 1.4 per cent. So if what they had before was virtually a riot I cannot see how what 1.4 per cent off that amount is going to cause peace in our time. Also, very serious questions have to be asked about the water that they use and what environmental assets are being watered. The people of South Australia have a strong connection with the Lower Lakes, and that is understandable. But what has to be understood is that the water that is returned to the rivers is very rarely ever going to get to South Australia. It will be watering assets such as the Culgoa floodplain, the Narran Lakes, the Barmah Choke. They are among a whole range of the 2,300 environmental assets. But that does not mean that it is going to end up in South Australia.

We have to look at exactly how this deals with the socioeconomic challenges of so many towns that would have been decimated before. In the process we also have to expand our moral paradigm of how we look at these issues. The last guide to the draft would have been responsible for the virtual destruction of the rice industry. The rice industry feeds 20 million people. If we take a staple of carbohydrate, which is rice, out of the food production of our nation—so therefore we are living on imports—we should not think that is where the issue finishes. In a time of privation somebody somewhere is going to miss out. So if you take the rice at the top out of production

everything shifts up and then the person at the bottom misses out. So a person in Southern Sudan whom you have never met or a person on the Thai-Burma border whom you have never met goes without. If you take out of the world's production of food the capacity to feed 20 million people with rice, somebody will starve. It is quite obvious that someone is going to starve to death. Someone will definitely die, generally some child—in fact, it will be thousands of them. That is the unfortunate circumstance of a reduction in the production of food. Australia itself since 1980 has been reducing the amount of farm area and also reducing the amount of farm production. If this Murray-Darling Basin plan in the end goes the way that we see it going, that will be accelerated. The Greens have said that they want 7,600 gegalitres taken out of the Murray-Darling Basin. If that happens it will close the place down. That would be an absolute disaster. You close down the agricultural capacity of everything from Shepparton right down to the Lower Lakes all the way up to Queensland. What an incredibly peculiar place to be.

The problem we have got is that in the current drafting of the act, and I admit it would not be the first act that ever had been amended, there are some very pertinent points that need to be assessed. On the very first page it says that the Water Act requires the authority to determine the volume of water required to maintain and restore environmental assets, using best available science and the principles of ecologically sustainable development. Subsequently the authority addresses the optimisation of environmental, social and economic outcomes—subsequently. So after you have done with the environmental issues you subsequently look at social and economic outcomes. To give a classic example, and we saw this in evidence, we said, 'If there was a town that needed 10 gigs of water to survive and below it was a swamp and a frog that needed 10 gigs of water to survive, who would get the water?' It said, 'That would be the swamp.' So the swamp gets the water and the town goes without. If this thing goes through in the form it went through before, then Canberra goes on to permanent water restrictions forever. They have built themselves a new dam but they will not be able to use the water in it. That is an interesting outcome for a city of 350,000-plus people, that they get to a point where they cannot use sprinklers, they cannot wash their cars, they cannot wash the footpath because of a decision that could possibly be in this plan.

The Premier of South Australia has said he is willing to challenge the act. To be honest, if you look at the advice from people such as Professor John Briscoe, Professor Judith Sloan and Professor George Williams, you will see that it could possibly be successful, it would likely be successful. In that success would obviously be a huge impost on all that surrounds the social and economic fabric of the 2.1 million people who actually live in the basin. So we must be open to the idea of at least amending the act in such a way as to deal with what both the coalition and the Labor Party promised, that we would look at environmental, social and economic conditions in equivalence—not environmental conditions in a superior form and then subsequently social and economic conditions but look at them in equivalence.

I want to put a human side on this. From what I can see, my own area is going to be one of the most affected by the new changes. It does surprise me somewhat that an Independent member in the New England area is hardly affected at all. That is a surprise. I hope there is nothing behind that, I hope that is just coincidence, but it is very surprising. The consequence for the Indigenous community of Dirranbandi would be catastrophic. If you want to advance Indigenous Australia, the best thing you can do is provide an economy. Social security does not cut it. We had one chance where we took people ahead and gave them an opportunity. We gave them commerce, we gave them jobs.

In our own area the unemployment rate is less than 2½ per cent. This takes us all the way back to where we were before. Houses that were purchased for \$80,000 and \$90,000—I know that is cheap but you must remember these people live in meagre circumstances—go back to \$5,000 and \$10,000. So think about those people when you make those decisions. Think about the people who cannot sell their house at all. There are people who say, 'My life might not have all the facets that I wished it had,' but the people you actually affect are the people whose expectations in life, whose access to things, are vastly inferior. How would you like it if your house became worth \$10,000 or \$5,000 or worthless? Do we have the moral right to do that to these people? That is exactly what we will do. You can say, 'They will move.' You cannot move anywhere. Where are you going to move to? You have got no asset to sell, you have got nowhere to go. You say, 'Well, they'll have a good education.' Not necessarily, because unfortunately as the wealth goes out of an area, so do all the social institutions. This is something we are about to inflict on people. It is a terribly unfair and unwarranted position that we would go to the people who really are in an inferior position already in terms of social and economic circumstance and inflict on them by reason of a bad draft of the Murray-Darling Basin plan a position that really entrenches their privation.

It will be a very tumultuous time over Christmas as we deal with the issues pertaining to the Murray-Darling Basin plan. People may think we have forgotten about it. We have not; we are very aware of it. We have been waiting for it. We see it coming. Surprisingly enough, it is announced when we have all left the joint. That seems to be what happens around here: 'We'll guillotine it or wait until they leave and then announce it.' We are absolutely going to be fighting this one to the end. We will be very aware of the facts of how the minister will deal with this in such a way as to bring about what he promised. The people of Griffith will want to know whether this actually deals in a fair way with the town of Griffith. The people of Deniliquin will want to know what is happening. The people of Shepparton are going to be very aware of what their circumstances are after this. The people of Goondiwindi are going to want to know what happens.

Senator Hanson-Young interjecting—

Senator JOYCE: Although Senator Hanson-Young might not be too concerned about Indigenous issues, the people of Dirranbandi might want to know. The people of Burke will certainly want to know what their future is like at the end of this. We have to make sure that we look after these people. You cannot say that you have an empathy towards Indigenous Australia, an empathy towards regional Australia, and then release a plan which decimates regional Australia and our nation's capacity to feed itself.

Debate interrupted.