



19 December 2010

Mr. Tony Windsor MP
Chair
House of Representative Standing Committee
On Regional Australia
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mr. Windsor,

I'm writing to forward my submission to the parliamentary inquiry established following the public release of the Murray Darling Basin Authority's *Guide to the Proposed Basin Plan*.

My submission is designed to broadly address only two of the points listed in the Terms of Reference:

- The direct and indirect impact of the Proposed Basin Plan on regional communities, including agricultural industries, local business activity and community wellbeing, and
- Previous relevant reform and structural adjustment programs and the impact on communities and regions.

The content of my submission reflect the insights gained from representing the "interests" of Victorian farmers in rural water issues whilst employed as the Victorian Farmers Federation's Water Resources Policy Officer. The submission also draws on my PhD research thesis which examined the politics associated with rural water allocations in Victoria.

I'm happy to make myself available to attend a public hearing to further discuss any matter which I've raised in my submission.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Barry Hancock

**A Submission to the
House of Representatives Standing Committee
on Regional Australia**

*Inquiry into the
Proposed Murray-Darling Basin Plan*

Dr. Barry Hancock

December 2010

Introduction

This submission is written to place on record what the author believes are the core issues simmering beneath irrigators' and rural communities reaction to the release of the *Guide to the Proposed Basin Plan* ("the Proposed Basin Plan") by the Murray Darling Basin Authority. The main proposition defended in this submission is: The angry response which the Proposed Basin Plan has elicited is driven by an underlying resentment about the loss of *what once was*, about *what now is* and, a concern for *what is to be* the future of rural society. Government will find many of the points this submission highlights are issues that cannot be overcome by simply offering farmers monetary compensation. If government and, those who advise its ministers, were to listen attentively, they would begin to understand they are not simply dealing with an angry mob who are protesting against the loss of water. They are, in fact, confronting an angry backlash over the loss of a much-cherished way of life embodying personal aspirations, cultural values and unique rural social solidarities which have sustained life on the land.

Under threat ... a way of life

Until the late 1970s, the image of the self reliant man on the land occupied an important place in the economic and cultural fabric of our nation. Farming was viewed as a vocation of great importance. It was generally acknowledged that for almost a century Australia had ridden to prosperity on the sheep's back. For much of this period, Australia's high standard of living was sustained by the export income generated from its primary industries.¹ Accordingly, the act of farming was seen as having an important purpose and farmers felt valued for the contribution they made to the broader prosperity of our nation.

In our nation's cultural and political psyche an image of the industrious man on the land began to emerge. The man on the land was hard working, self reliant, resourceful and used initiative to transform the nation's natural resources into quality food and fibre for the benefit of all. The happiness of the man on the land was created through endeavour such as sowing a crop and tending to its needs whilst it grows and from a satisfaction that they were producing produce that was valued by the rest of society.

For many, this image of the man on the land now sits uncomfortably with the reality of the highly urbanised nature of Australian society. Since the 1980s, the image of the "typical" Australian has been replaced with that of the man in a suit driving along a freeway to work who now embraces post materialist values.² While this representation of the typical Australian dominates much of urban society, the image of the industrious man on the land remains a potent symbol in rural society. At the core of this potent symbol are deeply

¹ National Film & Sound Archive, *Riding on the Sheep's Back*, Australian History Timeline. Retrieved 20 November 2010, <http://dl.nfsa.gov.au/module/1592/>

² Postmaterialist values reflect a shift in society has taken place away from materialist values primarily concerned with economic and physical security towards values which place greater emphasis on self expression, quality of life, freedom and environmentalism. See Ronald Inglehart's 'The Silent Revolution in Europe: Intergenerational Change in Post-Industrial Societies', *American Political Science Review*, 1971, Vol.65.

ingrained cultural values and normative processes which govern how people interact in rural society. It is important to be mindful of this. Because as Eggleston had argued: ‘every community that attains political organisation and consciousness has a way of life, a cultural heritage, an ethos, built up from its common experiences and education which, in turn, determines its operative ideas, its emotions and its policy.’³

The cultural values and normative processes of rural society shape the development of rural people’s sense of self. They underpin their beliefs and values and serve as important ends in themselves. The beliefs and values also provide the foundation of the strong interpersonal bonds that emerge between neighbouring landholders and serve as a reference point for engaging in the social and cultural life of the community. Despite notions of the rugged independence of life on the land, for the most part, rural life required co-operation, the establishment of close knit formal and informal networks, and trusting interpersonal relationships.⁴ The changes taking place within rural society are having a corrosive impact on the stability of these important dynamics that have been fundamental to sustaining life on the land.

Looking in from outside, it would be easy to simply dismiss such cultural values and normative processes as belonging to an era in our nation’s history that has long since past. This would be a mistake. As Inglehart argues ‘people live in the past far more than they realise. [They] interpret reality in terms of concepts and worldviews based on past experiences.’⁵ In times of great uncertainty and, when feeling undervalued, rural people become inward looking and cling to established values, worldviews and cultural symbols, which provide them with a sense of comfort and purpose in a rapidly changing world.

In today’s policy climate, farmers are confronted with a world in which they see government as having little regard for the value and future sustainability of agriculture. Such views have been formally expressed at Murray Darling Basin Authority public meetings in the following manner: there is a ‘lack of acknowledgement of food production and respect for people who produce that food’⁶; ‘food security is the greatest moral issue of our time’⁷ and; ‘that the government is disregarding the value of agriculture to the nation’s future ...’⁸

³ Frederic Eggleston, ‘Australia’s Immigration Policy’, *Pacific Affairs*, Vol.21, No.4, December 1948, p373.

⁴ Oeser, O., A. & Emery, F., E., *Social structure and personality in a rural community*, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, London, (1957), p23.

⁵ Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1991, p422.

⁶ Murray Darling Basin Authority, *Feedback from Deniliquin Community Information Sessions*, 13 October 2010. Retrieved <http://www.mdba.gov.au/communities/lastest-news/feedback-from-deniliquin> (28 Nov. 2010)

⁷ Murray Darling Basin Authority, *Feedback from Griffith Community Information Sessions*, 14 October 2010. Retrieved <http://www.mdba.gov.au/communities/lastest-news/feedback-from-griffith> (27 Nov. 2010)

⁸ Murray Darling Basin Authority, *Feedback from Mildura Community Information Sessions*, 27 October 2010. Retrieved <http://www.mdba.gov.au/communities/lastest-news/feedback-from-mildura> (27 Nov. 2010)

Together, these issues are a lightening rod to the deeper underlying resentment simmering beneath rural communities and irrigators concerning the ongoing economic and social viability of the family farm as the basis of our nation’s agricultural sector. The viability of the family farm, many farmers believe, is being eroded by the policies pursued by governments.

In rural Australia, the family farm is an important cultural foundation of rural society. As a cultural symbol, the family farm is the tangible expression of rugged independence where the man on the land is held to be in charge of his own destiny. Over time, the family farm has become an extension of the landholder’s personality, an outward reflection of their prosperity and, the embodiment of their intergenerational aspirations. Farmers seek to ensure their land is turned over to the next generation in a much better condition than when they commenced farming the land.

For many landholders, their ability and skill as a farmer underpins their social standing within the community. It also serves to align their cultural image with the self-image farmers hold of themselves as being good stewards of the land. Fenton illustrates this point in the following manner: ‘farms with no weeds are considered as being well looked after, well managed with the underlying implication being that the farmer is a “good farmer”.’⁹



Cultural symbol of the landholder’s prosperity and worth as a farmer. This irrigated lucerne paddock represents land that is being managed by a good farmer. **Photo:** Barry Hancock, December 2008.

According to Fenton, ‘land that was not “looked after” or which was abandoned often had implications in relation to self-identity and community well being.’¹⁰

⁹ Mark Fenton, *The Social Implications of Permanent Water Trading in the Loddon-Campaspe Irrigation Region of Northern Victoria*, May 2006, p20. A report prepared for the North Central Catchment Management Authority, Huntly, Victoria.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p18.



A picture of a land that had previously been a dairy farm. The land is now abandoned and had been for sale for sometime. A farm is difficult to sell once it has been stripped of its water entitlement. **Photo:** Barry Hancock, November 2010.

The prevalence of once productive irrigated land that has become overrun by weeds as water is sold off is symbolic of the declining economic and cultural wellbeing of irrigation dependent rural communities.



Previously irrigated farm land with water sold off and no longer in production and being overrun by weeds. **Photo:** Barry Hancock, February 2009.

At another level, it is an overt sign of an inward sense of abandonment by the landholder of their sense of self respect, their dignity and, their enduring sense of worth.¹¹ For the

¹¹ Barry Hancock, 'The permanent water market: A critical discussion'. Paper presented at the *Water Down Under 2008 Conference*, 14-17 April 2008, p487.

individual involved, it is also an outward reflection of unattained personal aspirations and goals they have for the future of their farm.

A Campaspe irrigator illustrates this point when she spoke of the impact the permanent sale of their water entitlement has had on their family. As this individual recalled: ‘her 19-year-old son had wanted to be a farmer, but the zero water allocation and rising hay and grain costs had meant they had recently decided to sell off their water.’ The result being ‘“That’s our son’s future gone”.’¹² The implication for farming and rural communities is the further loss of young people.

The realisation of the loss of family aspirations gives rise to intense feelings of guilt and one can suspect is also underlying the many references made about the incidence of mental health issues at the Murray Darling Basin Authority public meetings. ‘The symptom of “feelings of guilt” is a central feature of major depression.’¹³

According to Brooke’s, feelings of guilt reflect an individual’s acceptance of the responsibility for ‘a breakdown in the relationship(s) between a person, or people’ which generally arise within ‘an interpersonal context of shared values.’¹⁴ This issue is overlooked by policy makers who simply believe permanently selling one’s water entitlement provides the landholder with an opportunity to leave the land with dignity.

Dignity, however, Kass argues, embodies human aspirations such as a sense of achievement, intimate trusting relationships and, respect for oneself and others. Dignity is closely tied up with a sense of belonging and having a sense of control, a sense of empowerment and, real choice over the direction of one’s life.¹⁵ Many farmers believe their “dignity” is being eroded as they are required to permanently sell water entitlements as the equity in their farm declines and debt levels escalate.

This is underlying the response of irrigators at many of the public meetings held by the Murray Darling Basin Authority when the term “willing seller” is mentioned. For many irrigators, there is no such thing as willing sellers only “desperate” sellers.¹⁶ Despite the view that the water market is the expression of economic freedom, irrigators see their actual freedom to pursue their desired goals and objectives as being severely constrained by their economic, environmental and political circumstances.

¹² Paula French cited in Monique Preston’s ‘Human side of drought’, *Campaspe News*, 7 November 2006.

¹³ Kayhan Ghatavi, Rob Nicolson, Cathy MacDonald, Sue Osher and Anthony Levitt, ‘Defining guilt in depression: A comparison of subjects with major depression, chronic illness and healthy controls’, *Journal of Affective Disorders*, Vol.68, 2002, p308.

¹⁴ Roger Brooke, ‘Jung and the phenomenology of guilt’, *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, Vol.30, 1985, p176.

¹⁵ Leon R. Kass, ‘Defending human dignity’, *Commentary*, December 2007, pp56-57.

¹⁶ See the Murray Darling Basin Authority’s summary notes recorded for the public information meetings held in Albury, Echuca, Deniliquin, Griffith, Mildura and Renmark.

In fact, there is a growing sense amongst rural landholders that the current theoretically contrived model of competition being applied to the rural water sector is not producing ‘equality of sacrifice’ in adjusting to the scarcity of water or the restructuring of rural industry. Such a policy is contrary to the generations of government policies that actively sought to delivery equity within and between the rural regions of our nation.

Conclusion

Since 2000, the irrigation areas of northern Victoria have come under increasing structural adjustment pressures that have arisen from the combined effects of both “climatic” and “price” shocks. For policy makers, the adjustment that has taken place is a necessary consequence of the reality of resource scarcity that has plagued much of the first decade of the 21st century. However, change is never easy particularly when it results in outcomes which affront to the very ideals farmers hold dear. Farmers adhere to a philosophy of passing the land onto the next generation of farmers in a better condition than when they began farming. According to Alston, farmers also are bound by tradition and tend to view themselves as the true guardian of the nation’s cultural heritage.¹⁷ It is a cultural heritage which afforded the man on the land the respect they felt their profession deserved for the contribution it made to the nation’s social and economic prosperity. Failure to fully appreciate and respond empathically to these very real human experiences will only ensure the water reform process is made more political and desired objectives more difficult to achieve!

¹⁷ Margaret Alston, ‘Socio-cultural factors and family farming’, in *A Legacy Under Threat? Family Farming in Australia*, Edited by Jim Lees, University of New England Press, 1997, p100.