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Official Committee Hansard

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND HERITAGE

Reference: Catchment management

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND HERITAGE

Wednesday, 13 October 1999

Members: Mr Causley *(Chair)*, Mr Barresi, Mr Bartlett, Mr Billson, Mrs Gallus, Ms Gerick, Mrs Irwin, Mr Jenkins, Dr Lawrence and Mrs Vale

Members in attendance: Mr Bartlett, Mr Billson, Mr Causley, Mrs Irwin, Mr Jenkins, Mrs Vale

Terms of reference for the inquiry: Catchment management

WITNESS

Committee met at 11.18 a.m.

BOULLY, Mrs Leith Esther, Chairman, Community Advisory Committee of the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council

CHAIR—I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage. This is the second hearing of the committee's inquiry into catchment management. At today's public hearing the committee will hear from the Community Advisory Committee to the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council. The hearing today has been scheduled to take advantage of the presence in Canberra of the chair of the Community Advisory Committee, who I understand has travelled from regional Queensland.

Before proceeding, I advise the witnesses that committee public hearings are recognised as proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect that proceedings in the House of Representatives demand. Witnesses are protected by parliamentary privilege in respect of evidence they give before the committee. Witnesses will not be asked to take an oath or an affirmation; however, they are reminded that false evidence given to a parliamentary committee may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. The committee prefers that all evidence be given in public but should witnesses at any stage wish to give evidence in private they may do so and the committee will give consideration to the request. Welcome, Mrs Boully. We have received a submission from you. Would you like to give us a brief outline of that before we ask questions?

Mrs Boully—The submission was a very brief one, the purpose of which was to draw to your attention the importance that the community within the Murray-Darling Basin places on integrated catchment management. There is a need for it to continue to evolve and to develop so as to manage the basin's water resources in particular, as well as the catchments that contribute to the health of those resources. I do not think there is a lot more that I would like to offer; I would rather have a discussion with you than to pursue the submission.

CHAIR—I spent five years on the council. Originally the idea was to get the community working with the ministerial council and to get some input from the community. The council realised that if it did not have the community working with it, it was not going to get very far. The question is how that has progressed. Is the community, right throughout the catchment, involved? Do you think that they are getting a fair hearing from the ministerial council?

Mrs Boully—There are a few questions in that. Firstly, I would say that, within the initiative, the relationship between the ministerial council and the Community Advisory Committee has improved with time. Importantly, the relationship between the Community Advisory Committee and the Murray-Darling Basin Commission has improved, and there is a much greater willingness for commissioners to engage with the community in policy discussions. That would not have happened even a couple of years ago, so it is a very significant progression of the initiative, and it is something that I am very thankful for. Involvement across the basin in integrated catchment management on the ground is patchy. Victoria and South Australia are demonstrating some real leadership in devolution to regional

communities and empowering those communities to manage resources outside of the central agency approach.

There are some pluses and minuses with that. New South Wales is a bit of a mess in terms of the range of committees that they have and the lack of integration between them; in fact, it would be difficult to argue that integrated catchment management is happening in New South Wales. It is early days in Queensland in terms of integrated catchment management. There are a lot of aspirations on the part of the community but some inability, through lack of experience, to bring it off from a government perspective.

In all of those, the success stories have been where the catchment management groups have some authority and some power. Victoria and South Australia are showing the way of the future in being able to rate—being able to making groups accountable for the decisions they make and getting the groups to implement them. At its last meeting, the commission agreed that we would be having a good look at integrated catchment management, including the future and institutional arrangements. This will largely be driven by the dryland salinity issues that are arising at the moment, which of course have some impact on agricultural land, but the major impact of the dryland salinity issues into the future will be on river management, river health, urban communities, infrastructure, roads, towns, houses and biodiversity. The current range of arrangements, from a government and community perspective, will not be able to enforce the decisions needed to ensure that we still have reasonable water in our rivers. That is the challenge for the next decade.

CHAIR—You mentioned that Victoria and South Australia seemed to be doing it better, and I think you said it was because they have power to rate.

Mrs Boully—One of the tools that they have is a power to rate. They also have the ability, within their boards and their structures, to make decisions without having to go back to head office, and they can carry out the consultation in a better way.

CHAIR—I introduced TCM in New South Wales. One of the big problems that we had with the land-holders was the fear of a bureaucracy growing up to rate them and they would have no input into it. How do you overcome that fear? Or do you think that that has not been the case in Victoria?

Mrs Boully—It has certainly been the case in Victoria. You only have to read the press to see that. Victoria is in a different situation from other states. There are places and catchments in Victoria where rating has been going on for a long time under other arrangements. Rating is something that will be important for local communities because, as soon as you start to pay for something, you demand accountability and you demand to have a say in things. The reality is that government cannot pay for everything. If you are going to have some sort of equity in resource management then we all need to contribute something. It might be a very small something but you cannot introduce a ratings—

CHAIR—Including the towns?

Mrs Boully—Including the towns—including Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. We have already got a rating system for that—it is called tax—but we do not necessarily distribute it

particularly well in terms of resource management. Before you can introduce a rating system, you have to have the confidence of the community that the people who are going to manage that money are accountable, will make decisions, will implement them and will have a monitoring and evaluation system in place that they can report back on. As a land-holder, I am not going to give anyone my money unless I can see that they are accountable for what they are doing with it, and unfortunately most of our systems at the moment would not give you the confidence to contribute. Unfortunately the rating debate has just got caught up in politics.

CHAIR—We backed away from it.

Mrs Boully—The really important issues are about equity and contributing to management of the resource base. Politics has blown it out of all proportion.

CHAIR—One of the prime motives of this inquiry is to look at whether we are getting value for dollar in some of our work. You mentioned that in New South Wales there are a lot of separate committees which did not seem to have any coordination. Is it possible to broaden that a bit? If you cannot, could you give us a paper later to indicate where you think there are some problems in not getting that coordination and the best effort?

Mrs Boully—In any one region of New South Wales you will have TCM committees, a river management committee, a vegetation management committee and probably a ground water management committee, some of which have responsibilities under an act; others which do not. For example, there are vegetation management committees planning vegetation management in ignorance of what the salinity threats are, so there is no linkage between the issues and the outcomes that you might want to achieve for a catchment.

The vegetation management committees are set up on boundaries that are different from catchment boundaries, so you have some mismatches in the planning there. I understand that the New South Wales government is currently looking to bring the groups together in some way to bring about an integrated approach, but that needs to happen sooner rather than later, particularly to address the dry lands salinity issues that some of the catchments will be facing. That, in a nutshell, is where I see New South Wales is at. Certainly, the people who I talk to in New South Wales are sick of having a range of committees, because it is quite often the same people sitting on each committee and even that is not bringing the linkages, so you have to start to question whether there is a goal for this.

If you take the Murray-Darling Basin initiative, the goal for most of the catchments within the basin is to manage water quantity and water quality. If you take that back to the catchment, each catchment has to manage for an outcome at the bottom of that catchment—for the contribution it makes to the main stem of the river. Unless you bring the resource management issues together and have a plan whereby you can sit back and say, 'We are doing vegetation management to deliver these salinity outcomes, and we are managing ground water, in a way that does not impact on surface water, to produce a particular outcome,' then it is a waste of the community's time being involved in the planning. To date, the decade of land care has seen communities voluntarily contributing a lot of time. Most of us could spend every day at a meeting rather than at home earning an income, and people are very happy to contribute that time. They want to do things for the common good,

but they are becoming cynical because decisions are not being made. Governments and the bodies that are elected or nominated to perform outcomes are not making decisions, and they are not seeing progress to the extent that they would like to.

I think the age of voluntarism is almost over. There will still be people who will want to do things but they are not going to do them unless they can see a clear objective. Responsibility for setting those objectives does not just lie with government; it lies with communities as well and in having proper process. But unless you have the arrangements in place that allow people to move through that process, it does not happen.

CHAIR—Just one more quick question and then I will let the committee ask some questions. On that area, is this problem in New South Wales a typical bureaucratic turf fight—that departments are trying to look after their own little areas and not coordinating?

Mrs Boully—I should not really focus on New South Wales specifically, but generally it does not matter which state of the country it is, there are turf battles between agencies. It is a major impediment to catchment management.

In an ideal world you would have a catchment manager who was responsible for ensuring the health of the catchment, and you would have all of the agencies—resource management, agriculture, environment, regional development, local government—and all of the people who had an interest or an impact on resources involved. It does not happen. That is compounded at the Commonwealth level, where Environment Australia and AFFA do not seem to be able to agree on too much either.

Mr BILLSON—I was interested in your description of the problem in New South Wales in contrast with what we are trying to do in Victoria. TCM is a nice grab, but it is really about natural systems management—you cannot ignore parts of the system and expect to manage an outcome while leaving something else to the never-never. If you were to describe a model where a greater catchment management worked best, would the best starting point be to make sure you have those key variables on the health of the system at least on the table and within the jurisdiction of the authority rather than to have a bit done here, no matter how well, and a bit done there, no matter how well? Is that the sort of experience you are finding?

Mrs Boully—For me, the ideal model for catchment management—and recognise that I will come from the technical end rather than the social or the economic end—is that, before you start to make decisions, you understand how your catchment functions. You should understand the geology, you should know what your vegetation is and you should understand the hydrology so you have a database and a benchmark of what the current status or health is. Then you should sit down and look at what the trends are. There are very few catchments where we have good trend data; in fact, for most of them we do not even have the basic data about soils and geology, et cetera. Then you should look at the decisions you think need to be made or the areas you need to tackle. That is when you need to have a look at what the social and economic implications are of making changes or of not making changes, and that is where the three legs need to be brought in. There are not a lot of really good examples of where that has happened in Australia as yet; we are still very immature in the process.

Mr BILLSON—I sense that we missed an opportunity in Victoria—when we were setting up the CALP structure, which was at the same time that we were doing local government restructuring—not to have the local authority boundaries relevant to the catchment. When it comes to land use and vegetation clearance, even discharge and these sorts of things, there are jurisdictional levers in local government that are so essential to a good catchment outcome. It is the same with the water industry. There are harvesting implications from different land use. My sense is that probably all these organisations that have carved out a bit of their patch have to look at their catchment responsibilities and have that guide their decision making a bit more.

Mrs Boully—I have a very firm belief that it should be the catchment that drives decisions. Right across Australia we have missed huge opportunities with local government. Tasmania had an opportunity to align catchment boundaries with local government boundaries, or the other way around. Queensland at the moment is quite interesting because they have an Integrated Planning Act that local government operate under. They have no catchment management legislation at all, but the Integrated Planning Act would deliver all that you need it to deliver if the local governments were to agree to work on catchment boundaries or did realign their boundaries to catchment management.

But I do not have a lot of faith in local government delivering in the next couple of decades—I think we have some major issues to address. I see catchment management, or one of its forms, being a fourth tier of government in one way or another. It would be a partnership between community and perhaps three levels of government, but the reality is that, because local government cannot deliver, it will have to fill the gap between now and when local government can deliver, or when we have some sort of system of regional government.

Mr BILLSON—With the economic future of an area so intertwined with how the natural systems are managed and utilised, it leads more into a government type role. We have to make some choices at some point. If the money is not well spent trying to recover a heavily salt-laden river, that is a political call and politics has to have a part to play, guided by the science. It is getting to a point where big calls need to be made about resources, choices, communities and the impact on individual land-holders. Is it your sense that you need something that is more governmental in its flavour?

Mrs Boully—We have had a decade of spreading the few dollars that we have very thin across the whole landscape. I think the science is at a point, and people's understanding is at a point, where you have to ask whether we continue to spread it thinly and achieve very little in a landscape sense. We have achieved an enormous amount in terms of awareness and understanding but in terms of changing the direction of river health decline for example, we have done next to nothing. So the next decade has to be about making decisions. For example, we need to decide whether we invest most of our resources in catchments A, B, C and D—that, although we are very sorry for these other people, for a return on the investment for the Australian people the government money has to be invested here. In saying that, the objectives you are going to meet have to be very clear. If catchment A is too salinised to worry about, we have to live with that or invest in some innovation to find a way to use that land.

Mr BILLSON—Pursue agriculture or something?

Mrs Boully—There might be human health outcomes that outweigh agriculture, which would mean that you have to address other catchments first to ensure that you have drinking-quality water, for example. But there is no doubt in my mind that we have to make a very deliberate move to invest the limited resources we have in the best way that we can, and that is not to spread it across the landscape.

Mr BILLSON—I have one last question. On the issue of monitoring—the plan preparation and the oversight function—is it fair to suggest that the Victorian model worked better than others because the government accepted that the state of Victoria should pay for that core government function and that the best place to target additional rating money coming in from the land-holders was to works? Is that a model that we could look at further so that that broader state responsibility is defined and that the works end of the activity, if there is rating money coming from land-holders, is focused in on the works and not on the monitoring or planning or the science?

Mrs Boully—I think each of the states has some responsibilities under various bits of legislation that say that they should monitor—that they should do a whole lot of things. The states are very poor at delivering on most of that because resources are short. And, yes, I think the states should address their core business irrespective of what else is done.

In terms of how you pay for works, we need better and more sophisticated models to determine what that cost sharing or investment sharing arrangement should be. Victoria has made the first step in that direction, but we need to further develop that. There will be cases where there will be private benefit from public investment, but the public benefit will be far greater than that private benefit. We are a small country with limited financial resources, so we have to have a good hard look at what we want for our rivers. Do we want to be able to drink the water that it is in them? Instead of relying on perhaps some engineering solutions for drinking water, we might like to think about the biodiversity and the other values that rivers have that we would like to preserve as well. There are huge public investments to drive the public benefits from that.

Mrs IRWIN—You were talking earlier about local government. How can local government in a catchment community be strengthened?

Mrs Boully—Local governments already have significant powers within catchment communities. The major issue that we have to address is the capacity of local governments, from a financial and a skills perspective, to be able to contribute. Most of their staff are engineers or town-planners, and those town-planners can contribute a lot to catchment management. Resource agencies do not usually have too many planners in them—it is all a bit ad hoc—and so they can contribute a lot. If we could invest in capacity to build an understanding of the catchment processes in local government, it would go a long way towards addressing some of the lack of involvement problems that we have.

CHAIR—But most of the councils in New South Wales would have a local environment plan, wouldn't they?

Mrs Boully—They do, so New South Wales is perhaps getting there. Again, it is patchy across the country. Some local governments are very active and involved, but usually it comes down to having someone on the council who understands resource management and who is passionate about it, or someone on the staff who is. They are usually the success stories. Perhaps we have to continue to build capacity amongst the community as well as employed staff.

Mr BARTLETT—Carrying on from your earlier comments that the success stories were where the CMCs had more power, could you give an example of some of those success stories?

Mrs Boully—Off the top of my head it is difficult. There probably are not a lot of examples in Australia where catchment committees do have powers. If you take the Goulburn-Broken and the work that has happened there—which has really been a partnership between community and government, and local government in particular—they recognised that there were significant economic gains to be had from improving the way that they managed resources. Salinity was going to put not only farmers out of business but also the industry that the area relied upon. They started out quite voluntarily but now they have mechanisms where they cause compliance—not necessarily through a strict legislative sense but they have arrangements where you would not dare not do what was required to bring about an outcome.

I have just been part of a selection panel for an international river prize, which attracted a number of applicants from Australia. The prize went to someone outside of the country because there were not any of the Australian applicants that could demonstrate they were taking an integrated approach to river management—that they had set the objectives, that they were monitoring and evaluating against those objectives and that they had adequate community-government partnerships and could require compliance. It was pretty scarey when you see some of the best of what we have here up against international examples. We have a long way to go. The Mersey River Basin in England spent $7½ billion restoring a river.

It is a bit scary. Australia has not got any rivers that are perhaps in such a degraded state that we might want to spend that, but we will have in the future and I am not sure where the Australian community would find that amount of money. If we put some effort in the next couple of decades into preventing us from getting to that stage, it will save us an enormous amount of money.

CHAIR—You see that as best practice at this stage in Australia, but it is not world best practice?

Mrs Boully—Absolutely.

Mrs VALE—Exactly what is the degree of community involvement that you have in the basin?

Mrs Boully—That is patchy. On my good days I will tell you that it is very high and on my bad days that it is tokenism. Landcare has significant community involvement. The Landcare ethic is something that will endure out there. The Landcare bureaucracy is stifling

community involvement. A lot of us do not want to be involved in the bureaucracy of it, so we stay away from it. It will continue to attract the 25 per cent of farmers that it currently attracts. There are still 75 per cent of farmers out there who are not involved. Many of them in my view are the real movers and shakers and the people who can change public opinion. But they are not the sorts of personalities who want to do group work; they are the sorts of people who want to know what they have to do. They want to trust the process that is being used to come up with the decisions and directions that they need to take, and they want to know how to do it and get on with it. This is a really personal thing for me because, as a farmer, I do not like working in groups—I am not a member of the Landcare group and I never will be—but I want to trust that the people who are running the catchment will tell me that I have to fence off a piece of river or that I should run only so many stock in that paddock, and I will get on and do that. Unfortunately we are not really addressing that 75 per cent—if it is 75 per cent; it might be a bit higher or lower but it is around there. We are not addressing how we get those people from rural communities involved.

Mrs VALE—These are the ones that are having the impact, aren't they?

Mrs Boully—Absolutely.

Mrs VALE—You mentioned the word 'stifle'—that they are being stifled by the bureaucracy. Could you come up with any suggestions how perhaps stifling might not be the operative impact, and that it could be more interactive?

Mrs Boully—It is a difficult one for Landcare groups, under the current way that particularly federal programs are delivered, because you must have accountability. I do not think even Landcare groups currently are sufficiently accountable for the public resources invested in them. Financially they are accountable—their books are audited and you know they have not misspent the money—but in terms of delivering outcomes, I have not seen too many Landcare projects where I could say, 'This was the objective they set and this is how they went against that objective.'

Landcare groups should not necessarily have to do that as individual groups, and most of that has been thrown back on them at the moment. That accountability should be at the catchment level. Between the catchment or the region, there should be a contract with the Landcare groups to deliver. It is the catchment community, which is where the community-government partnership and obligation should be at, that calls these Landcare groups to account. That takes a whole layer of bureaucracy out of it, because it is up here that the accountability is being done. They should have indicators at the catchment level, rather than at the Landcare group level, that can track progress against improving natural resource management.

Mrs VALE—So you really need a significant rejig?

Mrs Boully—Yes. From the catchment perspective, if you implement it in that way, you would be able to satisfy the needs of the people who like to work in groups and get together and do things. You could contract with a group but you could also contact with individuals to deliver, so that if you knew an irrigator was having a particularly big impact on

contributing nutrients to the system, and the catchment knew that, they could negotiate a contract with that individual to deliver a better outcome.

Mrs VALE—And give that person a set of specifications so that individual knows exactly what he or she has to do?

Mrs Boully—Yes. Catchment management has to be a business. This is generalising and I should not generalise, but at the moment it is a bit like a comfortable group of like-minded people having a nice intellectual debate but not getting down to the hardnosed business end of negotiating outcomes.

Mrs IRWIN—How do you encourage these people within the community to get involved in catchment activities? Through education?

Mrs Boully—Education is a big part of it, and there has been a decade of Landcare's help there. I am a strong believer in regulation and in community-government partnerships—which we probably have not seen the best of yet—saying, 'You must do this.' As soon as someone tells you that you have to do something, you react very strongly, and you then get the debate.

CHAIR—So you believe this is to get them involved?

Mrs Boully—Yes. For me, conflict is the best way to get people engaged in resource management. I would not be involved in resource management now if it were not for a significant conflict that happened 10 years ago.

Mr BILLSON—Did you win, Leith?

Mrs Boully—No.

Mr BILLSON—So you are still fired up!

CHAIR—It is a very important point. We are in the business of politics, and you can use the stick—there is no doubt about that—to do some of these things, but the usual reaction is, 'We'll get rid of that lot and put someone else in.'

Mrs Boully—Unfortunately, that will always happen if politicians or elected governments try to do it on their own. I will use the example of the conflict that I was involved in 10 years ago, which was about a serious equity issue. The solution was not to be found locally. At the state government level, they had a piece of legislation that they could implement, and they did. They imposed it, there was a court battle and it was lost. But, through the intensity of that process, everyone realised that they had to negotiate an outcome or we were all going to lose. That has allowed a process to run for eight years now, and every single party in that community now wants regulation to enforce the plan that they have come up with. It is not a perfect plan but everyone has said that it has gone from a legislative regulatory approach that was not acceptable to designing one that was.

Had there been a better process to implement the consultation and negotiation in the first place, the government would not have had to suffer politically from it. It is a delicate issue. For example, if you look at the current debate on tree clearing in Queensland, the smartest thing would have been to bring in the legislation in a way that would allow communities, catchments and regions to negotiate an outcome that was reasonable to them but institute the moratorium to prevent the large-scale clearing that is going on—right next to me, for example—that is not even economic. It will not produce a single additional dollar for the Australian economy, and it probably might send some of those people to the wall financially. Although it is risky politically, there are times when governments have to take those big decisions. That is why we elect governments.

CHAIR—Has your group ever discussed a property rights system to try to encourage people? A few years ago I was trying to work my way through this in New South Wales. It can work in different ways; take nutrients, for example. If there is a nutrient load in the river, some property owner might have a low-lying area that they can divert the water through which, with aquatic weeds, will take out some of the nutrients. They have a property right, but they can sell it to people who have no option but to put nutrients back in.

Mrs Boully—I think that is the way of the future. If you look at the salinity and drainage strategy, it is the major example for Australia on how you trade pollution rights. That sort of approach will extend into dryland salinity.

CHAIR—That is a carrot, not a hammer.

Mrs Boully—Yes, although there might be some people who would think of it as a hammer.

CHAIR—You would have to set a standard. You would have to set a nutrient level and then try to achieve that level. Some people do it by taking it out, whereas others may not have any option but to put nutrients back in. The same thing could be said about vegetation and things like that. You could get property rights from that as well.

Mrs Boully—You can. The difficulty is having the science to support the development of the property rights. If there is one thing Australia could do really well now, it is to invest a lot more money than we have in the R&D behind supporting market-driven systems in resource management. The property rights in water look like being very successful at this stage. Some states have implemented property rights systems and others have not yet, but the basis of establishing those property rights is sound knowledge that people have confidence in and can then trade—carbon trading, nutrient trading, salinity trading, all of those—so long as you have got the science to underpin it and you can develop confidence.

Mr BILLSON—You have to define the scarcity first though. Imagine much the property rights of CAC and the Basin are worth.

Mrs Boully—That is right, but the CAC will not give.

Mr BILLSON—That is right, because that defines the scarcity and gives you the model on which to create the rights and the trading conditions. If you cannot get agreement—and

with people sticking with that scarcity barrier, whether that be salt load that is tolerable or nutrient load—you would end up without something to push your instrument off.

Mrs Boully—The science behind some of the critical ones, like vegetation management, is quite difficult because you are looking at the biodiversity values—perhaps with water as well, but it has not been handled yet. You would be hard-pressed at the moment to find nationally some vision for what biodiversity in agricultural landscapes should be. What do we want our rivers to look like? It is all pretty hotchpotch at the moment. The national natural resource management statement started out being directed towards sustainable agriculture and not natural resource management. If that sort of thinking continues at the national level, then I am not sure what hope we have for sustaining all the values that we have out there.

CHAIR—People's attitudes change. Ten years ago I would have guaranteed you that no one would pay for water, but they are now.

Mrs Boully—Yes.

CHAIR—They are buying water, so attitudes do change. It is a matter of trying to change those attitudes, I suppose.

Mrs Boully—Yes.

Mr BILLSON—But that takes you right back to where you began, which was having the tools to articulate and to scale the problem, the urgency, and what is making a difference. If you put $3 billion into project X and there is no change in the natural system condition then it is pretty hard to front up again and to say, 'Hang on, that was a bad choice,' because you have not got the basis on which to judge your success or otherwise.

Mrs Boully—One of the problems we have with setting objectives and then monitoring trends is that Australians love to tell someone they have failed and blame them for doing it.

CHAIR—It's the government's fault!

Mrs Boully—Of course it is. That is an attitude in itself that we need to change, because you learn from failure. We need to encourage people to take the risk of measuring whether they have made a difference and, if they have not, finding out why they have not made a difference but continuing on down the track.

You see lots of projects that are very good and are likely to bring outcomes that get dropped off because they have not demonstrated an outcome in three years, which is the term of an elected government. Many of our resource management funding programs are three-year funded programs. We are managing a very ancient continent that is highly variable in a 20-year period—you do not see the same conditions happen twice.

CHAIR—So you are saying that some of these things need to be funded in the longer term so that you have some degree of confidence of being able to carry on?

Mrs Boully—I really believe that natural resource management, which is regional economic development in reality, should be bipartisan and that there should be core funding.

CHAIR—A 20-year plan or something like that?

Mrs Boully—If there were a 20-year plan, I think you would see some commitment from communities. You would see people revitalised and prepared to make some of the hard decisions and to go through some of the structural adjustment that we need to.

Mrs VALE—Because they would have confidence in the fact that government is there for them.

Mrs IRWIN—That we are looking at the big picture. That is what it is all about.

Mrs Boully—Yes.

CHAIR—Just coming back to what we are doing. I am very aware that seven or eight years ago we had that 1,500 kilometre blue-green algal bloom in the Darling and the then Department of Water Resources in New South Wales identified the nutrient loadings. About 50 per cent was natural and 50 per cent was coming from our input. It also identified where you could reduce some of that loading, especially with the sewage systems inland taken back on the dryland irrigation, or something like that. Have we done anything about that?

Mrs Boully—I think we have made significant steps with sewage treatment plants.

CHAIR—So the inland towns are not putting them back in the river now; they are taking them on to some irrigation?

Mrs Boully—I cannot give you the numbers but most of the major point-source polluters have done significant works. I do not think point source is any longer a major issue, but the diffuse sources, the run-off from agricultural land, is still a major issue. Caught up with that now is that it is not just nitrogen and phosphorous that are a problem but also salinity. So we have salt from dryland that is going to contribute to declining river health. Again, we still have considerable extraction from rivers. That reduction in natural flow is a significant contributor to algal outbreaks. We are still having major algal outbreaks that are significant problems for urban communities.

CHAIR—I do not know whether you are aware but the first one was in 1874 at Lake Alexandrina.

Mrs Boully—We have always had them; they are a natural part of the system, but we have exacerbated it.

Mr BILLSON—I have a follow-up question to something you were saying before. The Victorian model had skills based appointments to the board, so if you could not contribute some horsepower, theoretically you did not get appointed. As you move more into a political environment, can you see a construct where you have a nine-person board, five are skills based and four are elected, and you are making these big decisions about resource allocation

choices—it sounds a bit like politics—where you have science and technology at the table arguing the case? You need to get only one or two of the elected reps to agree with you and they have got a stranglehold on the outcome. Is that the sort of longer term relationship you think—

CHAIR—Imagine what the farmers' organisations would say.

Mrs Boully—I was just going to make a comment about the Victorian structure. You might articulate them as skills based but I will bet you there is still a dominance of farmers on those committees.

Mr BILLSON—It says that in the act.

Mrs Boully—I do not think that is legitimate in the future. The Australian community has an interest in resource management; farmers are one stakeholder. It is a bit like the river management debates, where irrigators make up the majority of the stakeholders on river management committees. How can you legitimately say, whether you are an irrigator or not, that you are representing the wider Australian interests in that forum?

Mr BILLSON—If it is of any comfort to you, most of the submissions agree on one thing—that these boards are stacked. They all agree that they are stacked against whatever it is they want to do.

Mrs Boully—As a follow-up from the statement you made, in the future boards principally have to be skills based. As an individual punter out there, I want to have the confidence that there are the skills on that board that can make decisions. You need science skills, social skills, economic skills, farmer's skills and environmental interests—you need all of those. The balancing act for that is an incredibly difficult one, and it is very political.

I have not seen anywhere yet a system that would give you great confidence that all of the interests at the local level and at the national level are necessarily represented, but if you have state and Commonwealth agencies involved in those boards—either as members or not—I hesitate to say it but, because we elect governments and governments have agencies to carry out their views, those state and Commonwealth agency representatives should be representing the wider Australian interests. So long as they have a legitimate and equal right to be at the table and they exercise that right—a lot of them sit back and say nothing and then go away and tell the minister that the committee has got it all wrong; they do not articulate it accurately around the table—they should be able to represent the wider interests if we have got a proper process.

We have to be better at getting consensus outcomes. I do not mean 100 per cent agreement but consensus outcomes on what is reasonable for the region or the catchment and then being able to implement it. If these bodies have decision making powers, the community will make sure that they get representation that they are confident in, one way or the other.

CHAIR—Isn't that your charter though? Your charter is to convince the community in the basin that what the council wants to do is good for them?

Mrs Boully—No, the Community Advisory Committee's has a two-way role. One is that, sometimes, if council can think of questions—and usually it is the bureaucrats that design the questions that come to the Community Advisory Committee, which we are trying to change—council asks us for advice and we volunteer advice to council. I am very happy to support council in the decisions that they make, and so are the members of the committee, so long as we are confident that we have been through a discussion and a negotiation process that lets you sign off on what that decision is.

CHAIR—I was listening to what you were saying earlier. I do not disagree with what you are trying to do, but my first reaction was that that is why people vote for Pauline Hanson—because people are trying to tell them what to do and they have had a gutful of it. They then say they are going to vote for Hanson.

Mr BILLSON—I am going to let that one go.

CHAIR—That is true, that is the reaction in Victoria, it has been the reaction in Queensland, it was the reaction in New South Wales—the rural backlash.

Mrs Boully—Speaking as a rural person, the substance of why rural people are reacting is that we have declining terms of trade. We are flat out making a living.

CHAIR—And the government is putting more and more controls on them.

Mrs Boully—No, I do not think it is about the controls, it is about not being able to see a light at the end of the tunnel and having people in regions who are forward looking and motivated enough to say, 'It's okay. Just because we've done it this way, it doesn't mean we have to continue to do it that way. Let's look for new opportunities.' It is very hard when you are 55 or 60, you have grown up on the place, you do not have any other—

CHAIR—And $300,000 in debt.

Mrs Boully—You are $300,000 in debt and there is nothing in front of you. You do everything to prevent yourself from looking at what your options are. Rural communities need to face reality. The catchment management resource management process can facilitate that through looking at what other options might be. It is not about politics. Communities are poor. Look at rural communities and look at how poor people are. When you are that poor, you will blame anyone. Another aspect that we have to address is developing leadership capacity within rural communities. Unless you have someone who has a bit of vision and can take people with them, then this depression just builds on itself.

CHAIR—Will the leaders leave? The young ones who are your potential leaders have gone, because you said the average age is 58 or something.

Mrs Boully—We do not consciously develop those leadership skills within communities. There are people who are 55 and 60 who have huge leadership potential and they have wonderful experience. Until recent years, there has been very few leadership development programs. Now they are starting to emerge.

Mrs VALE—It is a matter too sometimes of painting a vision of where you would like it to be. Often human beings, being as complex as they are, will find the way to get there but you have to paint the vision first. I was wondering about CAC painting the vision. Sometimes you do not tell a group of people what to do; the best way for leadership is to encourage them to achieve an end outcome.

Mrs Boully—That is real role of the CAC; the two-way consultation. Politicians also have to give us some vision instead of some of what we get.

Mrs VALE—Yes, hopefully at the end of this inquiry we might be able to articulate something, but this is what it was all about to start with—to see how we could interconnect and perhaps paint a picture; how other people could put their hands up and say, 'This is how I would like to contribute.' It is a partnership.

Mrs Boully—Yes, it is giving people hope and vision—a picture of where they are going to go and the tools to get there.

Mrs VALE—As you said, it is about the government being there and backing the people on the land. The biggest thing that is missing is that lack of confidence that governments are going to back you.

Mrs Boully—Yes.

Mr BILLSON—Isn't what you are saying about turning the light on? A lot of the local communities have the wherewithal. I wonder whether it is government's role to drive or to lay out the vision or simply to turn the light on so that others in these structures that we have been talking about can take the leadership role and paint a vision for their catchment. If we do get to the point where we flog the rest of Telstra and the government says, 'We are going to put $10 billion away in a natural systems trust and we will guarantee you half a billion, $600 million a year, forever. Get it organised.' How are we going to spend it? How is your catchment going to argue for its share? How are you going to demonstrate to the rest of the taxpayer we are getting value out of that?

Mrs Boully—And what is your local vision.

Mr BILLSON—Yes, turning the light on. We are here, something has to happen, we do not want to get into the nitty- gritty of prescribing what it is. There is this resource stream in perpetuity, 'Let us get going at it and have a bit of a go.' Would that trigger those sorts of changes that you are talking about that need to happen at a catchment level.

Mrs Boully—So long as it is long term, it is supported by all sides of politics and it says, 'This is something that Australia has to deliver on no matter who is in power. You can have the political debates about a whole range of other things but not our natural assets.'

Mr BILLSON—You are not going to get the longer term political stability because governments are going to come and go but, if you have an anchor—a bedrock to tackling the natural systems issues—then maybe the politics might just muck around at the margins, and the community knows with confidence—

CHAIR—It never will, Bruce.

Mrs Boully—I think it devolves some of the politics to the region and away from state and federal governments.

Mrs VALE—Then it will not be so insurmountable, perhaps. It will be a lot more grounded, as Bruce said, in the bedrock of the community.

Mrs Boully—Yes.

CHAIR—Thank you very much.

Resolved (on motion by **Mrs Vale**):

That this committee authorises publication of the proof transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 12.11 p.m.