

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS BY SENATOR ANDREW BARTLETT

1.1 The level of public interest in this inquiry from south-east Queensland and northern New South Wales, as well as from people interested in water management and environment issues, is an indication of how valuable a Senate Inquiry can be.

1.2 The Committee's majority report gives a reasonable summary of the information the Committee received through the course of this Inquiry, but does not draw any major conclusions or recommendations from it. Whilst I appreciate water management issues are predominantly a matter for the Queensland government, and decisions made about the proposed dams in Queensland under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act* are a matter for the federal Environment Minister, I believe it is appropriate for the Committee to make specific recommendations about these issues, if there is the evidence to back them up.

1.3 The assessment processes regarding the Traveston and Wyaralong dams will not be completed until after the federal election. It is therefore unknown who the federal Environment Minister will be at the time, and what party will be in government when the decisions needs to be made under the EPBC Act about whether these dams go ahead. It is inappropriate, under law, for a Minister or political party to indicate what decision they will make under the Act, in advance of seeing all the information on which they must base their decision. However, there is no doubt that the EPBC Act provides the federal Environment Minister with the power to stop both these dams if the projects are assessed as being in breach of the federal environment law.

1.4 It should be noted that, had the EPBC Act not been passed into law, in a significantly strengthened form, by the Democrats in 1999, the legal avenues for the federal government to stop the construction of the environmentally and socially destructive Traveston Dam would not exist. Despite the Democrats being accused at the time of "*the most disgusting sell-out of the Australian environment and laws to protect the Australian environment that this Senate chamber has ever seen.*"^[1], it is a simple fact that the power to stop dams such as this did not exist at federal level prior to the passage of the EPBC Act. Without straying too far outside the purview of this inquiry, while the EPBC Act could certainly have been better enforced and better resourced, it is only because of the existence of the EPBC Act that a number of other environmentally harmful proposals have been stopped or mitigated, including logging of native forests in Tasmania or the Nathan Dam in Queensland.

1.5 Whilst the legal process under the EPBC Act requires that all the evidence be assessed before a decision is made by the federal Environment Minister on whether to approve an action, the evidence provided to this inquiry makes a very strong *prima facie* case that the Traveston Dam will have a significant negative impact on matters of national environment significance as defined under the EPBC Act - in particular,

the impacts on key threatened species (most notably the Queensland lungfish), Ramsar listed wetlands and the World Heritage values of the Great Sandy Strait.

1.6 For example, the evidence by internationally acclaimed lungfish expert, Professor Jean Joss, was unequivocal. Her submission to the Committee stated that *"the completion of the Mary River dam would almost certainly push it to "critically endangered", and in the long term will lead to its extinction in the wild" an assessment reaffirmed at the public hearing."*

Senator BARTLETT—Is that your scientifically based opinion?

Prof. Joss—It is.^[2]

1.7 Whilst a lot of focus has understandably been given to the communities and catchments upstream of the dam wall which will be inundated, the impacts on water quality and the adjoining lands should not be underestimated. Evidence provided at the public hearing Gympie by the Tiaro & District Landcare Group and the Mary River Riparian Landholders Group^[3] was very valuable in giving an indication of how serious the environmental consequences have been from the construction of even a small barrage. It is clear that harm to the majestic wetlands and estuaries of the Great Sandy Strait from the Traveston Dam will be unavoidable and significant.

1.8 There has been much evidence provided to this inquiry, such as the material provided by Professor Stuart White on behalf of the Mary Council of Mayors^[4], which shows that there are workable alternatives that can be achieved. The comprehensive evidence provided by Dr Bradd Witt, Katherine Witt and Andrew Taylor^[5] not only demonstrated the serious flaws with the Wyaralong Dam proposal, but provided clear alternatives, scientifically derived from publicly available evidence. Their evidence was not substantially refuted by the Queensland government, and showed both that Wyaralong would be a very expensive and unreliable project, and that there are ranges of more reliable, less expensive alternatives.

1.9 The Australian government has the mandate and the responsibility to intervene in these projects. I believe the risk of south-east Queensland metropolis of running out of water and permanently degrading important environmental assets is so great that Federal intervention is justified in this case.

1.10 The Australian government responsibilities for EPBC as well as for implementation of the COAG's National Water Initiative require the Federal government to be satisfied about the environmental sustainability and economic viability of the proposal.

Environmental sustainability

1.11 The development of dams globally often causes dislocation of local people and environmental damage. Development plans also often fail to deliver on the promised outcomes relating to water quantity and quality. Over 60% of the world's 227 largest rivers have been fragmented by dams, which has led to the destruction of

wetlands, a decline in freshwater species - including fish, turtles and birds - and the forced displacement of many people.

1.12 It is time the outdated knee-jerk response of building more dams and water storages was confined to the history books. As evidence to this inquiry shows, many existing dams in south-east Queensland have totally failed to deliver reliable water supplies whilst causing immense environmental damage. To keep repeating the mistakes of the past is just plain crazy, particularly when they are such expensive and destructive mistakes. If anything, it is time to start looking at removing some of these failed water storages and restoring some of our waterways to health, rather than spending billions of dollars to stuff things up even more.

1.13 The Queensland's governments plans to dam the Mary River and Teviot Brook fail to recognise the need for transparent and cooperative planning, fail to meet the need for robust information to underpin predictions of water availability, and fail to thoroughly investigate the potential for alternative, decentralised sources of supply to meet the water needs of the urban areas of south-east Queensland.

1.14 The Committee has missed an opportunity to undertake a more in-depth analysis of the implications of stage one versus stage two of the Traveston project under the EPBC Act, and to encourage the Minister for the Environment and Water to keep this in mind when considering the referral of the project and its impacts on the 59 state and Commonwealth listed species potentially affected by the project.

1.15 Critical habitat protection is essential for species viability, and the Mary River provides critical habitat for the biologically irreplaceable and ancient Queensland lungfish.

1.16 The example set by the Paradise Dam – a Dam backed by both major parties in Queensland, but already widely acknowledged in evidence to this Inquiry as a disaster - should be closely explored by the Queensland government and by the Commonwealth Minister for the Environment. The impacts of that dam, including ecological and environmental effects, its current low volume and the lack of economic benefits for the people most closely affected, must be taken as a strong example of the likely outcome of plans to dam the Mary River.

1.17 This inquiry, like many before it, has made plain that issues relating to dams are not limited just to the design, construction and operation of dams themselves. Decision-making processes that consider dams must investigate and address the social and environmental impacts that follow from the re-allocation of a fundamental resource from one place to another.

1.18 The Committee heard evidence that questioned the appropriateness of bilateral arrangements under the EPBC Act where the State government performs the assessment function under the EPBC Act at the same time as being the proponent of the project under assessment. The Committee should recommend that this situation is reviewed.

1.19 The Committee also heard evidence that in several proposed water infrastructure projects, the effects of climate change on river flows were not taken into account in the assessment of water supply.

Economic viability

1.20 The Queensland government must publish its comprehensive evaluation of viable alternatives clearly explaining costs and risks associated with each alternative compared with the costs and risks of the proposed Traveston and Wyaralong dams. To move any further down the planning and assessment processes for the project without giving the community the benefit of this wisdom can only further undermine the legitimacy of the proposals in the minds of the community and experts.

1.21 To ensure the economic viability of this project there should be a thorough investigation of alternatives including detailed assessment of storm-water harvesting such as rainwater tanks. It is possible past assessments of tanks have been outdated by the rising costs of building dams in less than ideal sites.

1.22 In quantifying the cost of the Traveston dam, the following types of costs should be included:

- Planning, feasibility and impact assessment
- Land acquisition
- Dam construction
- Diversion and reconstruction of the national highway and energy distribution infrastructure
- Distribution costs all the way back to Brisbane
- Management and maintenance costs of dams and distributions
- Carbon costs given an emission trading system will start by at least 2012
- “Offset” environmental costs
- “Upper bound” ROI capital costs required by the NWI
- Time value of money – expended now but revenues a long way down the track

1.23 The cost efficiency of the project can then be assessed when ranked by cost/megalitre, a calculation which is obviously influenced by yield assumptions. Yield can not be sold if the dam is empty. If you build the dam and the drought continues there will be a long wait (and more cost) until it pays back

1.24 Once the cost per megalitres has been calculated it is quite possible the dam is more expensive than many other alternatives. This conclusion may be consistent for the other dam proposals as well, in which case switching budgets currently assigned to the dam to the emergency fit out of rainwater tanks to large shopping centres, factories

and houses with in high and moderate rainfall and use areas, may provide more water sooner, safer and cheaper.

1.25 It is also apparent that south-east Queensland is moving towards reaching its population carrying capacity. Much more genuine, thoughtful consideration needs to be given to ways to reduce population growth pressures in south-east Queensland and provide incentives for settlement of people in other parts of the state. This does not mean 'fencing off the area' or 'keeping people out', it means doing some more considered long-term planning that does not just assume population growth as a given for a specific region, and puts balanced assessments about environmental and social impacts, and efficient investment in infrastructure ahead of the priorities of property developers.

1.26 These dams will not save Brisbane from drought. As has been regularly detailed in the *Courier-Mail*, existing dams may well run out well before Traveston can be built. It cannot be guaranteed that recycling or desalination projects will provide enough water in time. Yet faster, cheaper and more secure options exist. Traveston and Wyaralong repeat the folly of all dams - they fail in drought when water need is at its most severe. Some analysis has shown the both Traveston and Wyaralong would be bone dry by now even if it had been built in the nineties. This shows that neither Traveston nor Wyaralong would be a secure option. The example of Paradise Dam, currently at 9% capacity, is a useful one to keep in mind when considering this. Instead we must look to consistently using less water and re-using stormwater and waste water more.

1.27 Chronic wastage and excessive use continues in the suburbs of Brisbane. Rainfall close to the coast is much higher than the Wivenhoe or Traveston catchments. If the dams' massive budgets were spent on tanks, recycling and retrofit of water saving technologies, south-east Queensland would have a more secure future. Other dams such as the Borumba Dam raising could be even worse environmentally. This proposal poses all the same impacts on downstream threatened species, as well as drowning higher quality vegetation and just like other dams relies on rainfall - and will fail when needed most.

Recommendation 1

1.28 All political parties, and particularly the two major parties who are competing to form the next government, should give an unequivocal statement that they will use the powers in the EPBC Act to stop either or both of the Traveston and Wyaralong dams if the evidence clearly shows there will be a significant impact on a matter of national environmental significance.

Recommendation 2

1.29 Whilst there have been some positive projects developed by the Queensland government in recent times encouraging water tanks and other rainwater harvesting, there is far more that can be done and can be achieved in this area. Should the Queensland government continue in its refusal to adopt a

comprehensive evidence based, best practice approach to delivering sustainable and secure long-term water supplies for south-east Queensland, the federal government should use its powers and responsibilities under the National Water Initiative to ensure the large amounts of money being splashed around are properly applied.

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^[1] Senator Bob Brown, Senate Hansard, 22 June 1999, page 5949

^[2] Committee Hansard, 11 May 2007, page 41

^[3] See Committee Hansard, 17 April 2007, page 90

^[4] Submission 157

^[5] see Submissions 155, 155A and 155B, plus Hansard of evidence to Committee, Brisbane 18 April 2007