



DAVID MORRIS MP

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Local Government

Member for Mornington

The Gippsland Lakes – A Matter of Public Importance Legislative Assembly, 2 September 2009

Mr MORRIS (Mornington) — It is a great pleasure to join the discussion on this very important matter of public importance submitted by the member for Gippsland East. It has been instructive listening to the debate to hear the absolute dearth of positive contribution from government members. It has all been about what other people are alleged to think and alleged to have done, but there is absolutely no reference to their absolute lack of action for the last 10 years on this important natural asset.

The Gippsland Lakes are a vitally important part of the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of not only Victoria's east but I suggest the whole state. The Gippsland Lakes catchment is a very large piece of country that stretches from Warragul in the west to Lakes Entrance in the east and as far north as Omeo. It encompasses not only the lakes themselves and the flood plain along the coast but runs right up into the high country. It is an area of spectacular natural beauty, and it is also an area of great environmental sensitivity.

It is now almost universally understood that what you do in one part of a catchment almost inevitably has an impact in other parts of a catchment — in this case what you do upstream will have an impact on the lakes. If I might be permitted a personal anecdote, in 1976 as a very young man I had the opportunity and great pleasure of participating in the construction of a ski lodge at Mount Hotham. Every weekend from early January to the middle of July, when there was plenty of snow on the ground — indeed, every public holiday, Easter, every opportunity we got — we would head up the highway to cut the footings from the rock or stand up the frame or do any one of the many things you do as an unskilled person helping in that sort of construction.

A task that consumed the most time in the whole construction effort was setting, jackhammering out and establishing the septic tank and associated outfall. Blasting was used to blast out the pit of the septic tank. Perhaps it is an apocryphal story — I do not know; I was not there — but I am told that the resultant blast registered on the seismograph at Melbourne University. Whether that is true or not, that was the end of the blasting, and probably hundreds, if not thousands, of hours were spent on the end of a jackhammer by everyone involved. The septic system was eventually put in place and became operational, and all that was in accord with the regulations at the time.

What we were doing of course was constructing at the top of the catchment a facility to discharge nutrient which eventually found its way down into the Gippsland Lakes, and it was not until far too many years after that that a reticulated system was put into

place. For many years all those lodges on that particular side of the Great Dividing Range were discharging nutrient into the Gippsland Lakes every day during ski season, and that is a scenario that was repeated across the country.

In the intervening period Victoria has experienced enormous population growth, and that growth requires considerable investment in infrastructure. I am not talking only about schools, hospitals, public transport and roads, in which the absence of investment has been conspicuous in the last 10 years, but also the need to invest in social and environmental infrastructure.

Since the time when we were building the ski lodge at Hotham the environmental footprint of the Victorian population, because of an increase in numbers, has grown enormously. The population continues to grow; some estimates put it at a very healthy and satisfactory rate and other estimates put it at an alarming rate. Without engaging in that particular discussion it is fair to say we need to ensure that it is managed in an environmentally sustainable manner. It has the potential to have a significant impact on our natural assets, like the lakes, and if we do not manage it properly and make the necessary investment in environmental infrastructure and the sorts of organisations that the member for Gippsland East in particular has been talking about, we will do further damage to our natural assets.

There is no shortage of agencies involved in the management of the lakes. There was an estimate of some 32 different agencies led by the now unfunded Gippsland Lakes catchment management task force, and there are many other key players as well: the Department of Sustainability and Environment, the West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority, the East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority, the Department of Primary Industries, the Environment Protection Authority, Melbourne Water, Parks Victoria, local councils and many others. I understand that in the last 12 months as many as 14 programs have been undertaken in an effort to improve water quality in the region. It is somewhat ironic that we have all this bureaucracy, all this red tape, involved for spectacularly little result. Then at the end of it we have the situation of an organisation like the task force having to put out its begging bowl to try to continue the good work that has been undertaken.

For a number of years while I was on the Mornington Shire Council I was also a member of the Western Port regional planning committee, and I have referred to that in the house before. One of the critical roles that we became involved in was providing leadership for the environmental management of Western Port, a similarly very fragile environment. Without that leadership we would never have got the reduction in nutrient levels and we would never have got the controls on the development that impinges on Western Port. That is the sort of leadership that has been taken away by the de-funding of the task force, and if this trend continues, it has the potential to do significant long-term damage.

Development in East Gippsland is going to continue apace, I suspect. Tree change as a phenomenon is going to broaden as the population ages, and I do not have any doubt that as those pressures increase and as the pressures for development adjacent to the

lakes increase it will have environmental consequences unless we think about it and deal with it. That is something that has been conspicuously absent from the approach of the government.

I believe this is an important matter not only for eastern Victoria but for the entire state. It says a lot about the priorities of this government that not one minister has been prepared to come into the chamber and defend the stewardship of the government in the last 10 years in this place...

...Instead they sent in the B team, a B team which has comprehensively failed to come to grips with the very important issues raised by the member for East Gippsland. Instead the B team dwelt on what it claims, totally erroneously, might be coalition policy. In taking that line, that lazy approach, it clearly demonstrated its contempt not only for the health of the Gippsland Lakes but for the people of eastern Victoria.
