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Melbourne's Future Water Sources Legislative Assembly 14th October 2009

Mr MORRIS (Mornington) — In June this year the Environment and Natural Resources Committee presented a report on Melbourne's future water supply — a report with which you, Acting Speaker, are very familiar. The terms of reference essentially revolved around supplementing Melbourne's water supply, and a range of alternatives were considered for investigation.

The committee ultimately came back with some 48 recommendations, including recommendations relating to groundwater, desalination, the treatment of waste water, and stormwater harvesting. It covered efficiency issues and included discussions on a number of other options for water sources.

The coalition members of the committee — the members for Evelyn and Swan Hill, and Mrs Petrovich in the other place — also contributed a minority report, which rightly condemned the Brumby government for its decision to abandon a 2005 commitment to not rip water away from northern Victoria. The minority report highlighted the need in particular to recover the environmental flows for the Living Murray initiative, and also highlighted the lack of delivery in terms of the promises made about reinstating flows for the Snowy River.

A separate minority report talked about the Gippsland Lakes, a subject that was canvassed thoroughly in a matter of public importance debate in this chamber on 2 September.

The reality is life in Victoria from first settlement came with water scarcity. While it is a reasonably green place and has a temperate climate, we simply never have had a lot of water. Back in 1803 — more than 200 years ago — when Colonel David Collins settled near Sorrento, 400 souls had to rely on six barrels sunk in the sand to try to eke out enough groundwater to survive. That supply was clearly not viable then, and we have had a succession of pressure points ever since.

In 1840 — five years after permanent settlement — Melbourne consisted of some 7000 souls, and water was selling for 3 shillings a barrel, which at the time must have been an absolutely extortionate price. I have not had time to do the conversion, but it would be substantial.

Ever since then our population and water supply needs have grown at a rapid pace. If you go back to 1968, about the time when work started on the Thomson Dam, the population of the Melbourne statistical division was some 2.4 million; it is now 4 million. Growth is going to continue, and that is a good thing, but we need to look at

alternatives, and we need to particularly look at alternatives to our reliance on rainfall and static storage.

The committee made some recommendations in terms of stormwater harvesting. I want to highlight a submission to the climate change green paper from the Mornington Peninsula Shire Council, which picks up these things.

It states:

The shire supports decentralised water capture and storage solutions.

It talks about the importance of locally based projects for water storage and to enhance local employment opportunities and seeks some clarification from the state government on the responsibility and ownership with regard to stormwater and some support for the development of stormwater harvesting precincts.

The shire also makes some recommendations which link in with chapter 5 of the committee's report on recycled water. In its green paper response it highlights the importance of using recycled water for agricultural purposes, including a project called the Bunyip Food Belt, which links activities in the shire of Mornington Peninsula, the city of Casey and the shire of Cardinia and correctly talks about the potential to offset the challenges to food production that climate change will bring.

Not only is it about close access to recycled water but of course a substantial reduction in transport costs in terms of getting to markets and therefore emissions as well. I commend the council for the work it has done on the water issue and its response to the climate change green paper, and I urge the government to consider its propositions. It should be an extremely valuable contribution.