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Environmental Flows Must Have Community Support

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Mr MORRIS (Mornington) — The principle that we need to provide water for environmental flows is common ground certainly in this Parliament and also in the community, but inevitably there will be some tensions surrounding the process of determining what is a reasonable or necessary environmental flow. There will be tension surrounding who else in the catchment should have an entitlement to make demands on the system, and of course in times of drought that tension will certainly escalate. If the projections for lower overall rainfall are fulfilled, we will have lower stream flows. If that is correct, then the tension is likely to continue to increase.

Consideration of likely future rainfall patterns and the impact on the level of sustainable diversions is a discussion that needs to be considered by the community; the community needs to have considerable debate on it.

For example, if rainfall in a particular catchment declined by 50 per cent over the next century — these are purely arbitrary figures — is it reasonable to argue that diversions should be reduced by such an amount as would retain a sustainable flow that was determined as of today's date?

Should there be an acceptance that over time that there needs to be change and therefore the proportion of diversion would perhaps remain constant? In other words, the level of water available for environmental flows would decline.

Should we be saying that our baseline data, whether it be from 1990 or 2000 or whenever, is the line that we draw in the sand and therefore we need to maintain, even 100 years later, that level of environmental flow?

Are we going to try to force an adaptation, which perhaps might become degradation; who knows? That is the debate the community needs to be having.

I am sure there will be views at both ends of the spectrum and all points in between, from the no change or even no diversion argument at one extreme end to the other end perhaps saying, 'No. We will keep the diversions going and we will not worry about the environmental flows at all'. That is the debate the community has to have.

It is a subject that is going to be on the radar for some time, and of course it has been on the radar for some time already in terms of the Murray-Darling system.

The pressures and passions that that particular debate has aroused were evident in recent weeks when the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists produced a report titled *Sustainable Diversions in the Murray-Darling Basin* which suggested that on average a two-thirds natural flow in all catchments of the basin would be an appropriate flow regime and to achieve that the cap on diversions would need to be increased by 4400 gigalitres.

Without going through the detail of that — because of course many of the tributaries are in Queensland and New South Wales — the major impacts were borne by the Murray, with an identified necessary reduction of 39 per cent, and by the Murrumbidgee a reduction of 65%.

That translates into significant economic impact, estimated by the Wentworth group to be a reduction of 12 per cent of profits for the Murray catchment and 26 per cent of profits for the Murrumbidgee catchment, which obviously would result in a substantial amount of money being taken out of local economies.

That report led to some immediate, some may say knee-jerk, reactions. An AAP article says:

Murrumbidgee Irrigation was quick to reject the report

The National Farmers Federation slammed the 'cavalier' report ...

Natural resource manager Deb Kerr said the valuation of regions was based on old data, and overlooked the technologies used to make water go further.

And so on.

Of course you would expect that sort of reaction, but I think it indicates that we need to have a much broader community debate. Neither the Wentworth Group nor the National Farmers Federation could be characterised as extreme organisations, but these sorts of necessary discussions do inflame passions.

I understand that subsequent to the release of that report the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council met in Melbourne on 18 June and following the meeting met with authority members to receive a progress update on the developing basin plan.

It is only when we get these plans into the public domain that we will be able to have that necessary full-on community debate about the future not only of environmental flows but also the industries that depend on the diversions.

In terms of the bill, I certainly welcome and support the proposals that have been put on the table, particularly the establishment of the Victorian Environmental Water Holder. If the bill achieves its intended result, it will have the effect of ensuring that we are able to use environmental water in a genuine manner to protect environmental values.

That would certainly be in stark contrast to the present situation where a recent Auditor-General's report has made it clear, despite the government's claims, that environmental water intended for our rivers, including the Murray, the Goulburn, the Snowy, the Thomson, the Yarra and others, is not being used to best effect, and that despite the talk, the spin and the constant media, three-quarters of Victoria's rivers are in fact degraded.

I want to talk about the structure of the bill. There are really just two aspects that I want to cover. One relates to the governance and the knowledge and experience requirements for commissioners of the water holder. The bill proposes that the environment minister may recommend a person for appointment if that person has knowledge and experience of one or more of the following fields: environmental management, sustainable water management, economics or public administration.

I simply make the observation that I would hope the emphasis would be on the first two — that is, environmental management and sustainable water management. Experience in economics and public administration is certainly desirable, but I would hope there would not be a preponderance of that experience in the membership of the water holder. We need people with some considerable experience.

There are a couple of other concerns, including the potential for movement via the water grid of environmental water between catchments. I know it will be of concern to quite a few people on face value. I do not share that concern, but I do appreciate that it is a matter that needs to be dealt with in a sensitive way.

The other issue is how this body may be able to relate to the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder. In an area like this clearly, particularly with the Murray-Darling system, this is necessarily a joint state and commonwealth exercise, and the continued involvement of the state is critical to ensuring that the interests of Victorians are represented in this debate.

The proposals contained in this measure are certainly worthy of support, but the bottom line is that we will not achieve the full result until the government cuts out its posturing and puts some serious plans, particularly the Murray-Darling Basin plan, on the table so the community can have the full debate that it needs to have.