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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Murray-Darling dilemma needs to be put in context

Recent utterances by the Wentworth Group and others regarding remedial action for the stressed Murray Darling system need to be put into context according to the Independent Member for New England, Tony Windsor.

Mr Windsor says that over-allocation of water licences in some parts of the Murray Darling are and have been for many years seen as an issue that needs attention, hence the so-called buyback policy and to some degree the water efficiency policy.

However, he says that "Climate Change" is now the new policy on the block which argues that in the Murray Darling system, inflows will be substantially reduced due to this phenomenon.

"In the Climate Change scenario, lower rainfall and increased evaporation will impact on the availability of water in the system for competing interests.

"The Government and the Wentworth Group need to clarify the contribution to the overall issue of both these "contributors" so that each can be adequately addressed and combated," Mr Windsor said.

Mr Windsor recently asked the Prime Minister in Question Time about exact inflows into the Murray Darling system.

His question was, "My question is to the Prime Minister and relates to comments made by the Prime Minister, senior ministers and scientists that a major part of the Murray-Darling crisis is caused by climate change. Could the Prime Minister quantify how many gigalitres of lost inflows in the Murray-Darling system are caused by climate change? Given Professor Garnaut's admission that his recommendations of five or 10 per cent emission reduction targets by 2020 will not alleviate the Murray-Darling crisis, would the Prime Minister initiate a cost-benefit analysis of potential intercatchment transfers of water to cancel out the climate change components of the reduction in inflows?"

The Prime Minister replied, "I thank the honourable member for his question. I know his deep concern for the state of the Murray-Darling. His questions are always properly framed and they go to the whole question about what we can practically do about the challenge which is faced there, given the history of overallocation and the scientific consensus about the impact of climate change in making that system more stressed than it has been in previous times.

The scientific consensus most recently reflected, from memory, in a CSIRO report, which also involved the Bureau of Meteorology, was that climate change was a factor in bringing about the current stress of the Murray-Darling system.

Therefore, in our response to it, the key challenge is dealing with the long-term measures: how do you act on climate change nationally and globally and how do you take off water pressures now? .../2

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That goes to what the government is doing on the overallocation of water entitlements,

Thirdly, what do you do to increase the efficiency of the irrigation system? I will come back to the question which the honourable member has asked about a cost-benefit analysis.

These are the three practical measures which are necessary in the here and now to deal with the stress which is currently being experienced by the system. That is why in the meeting most recently with the Council of Australian Governments we allocated billions of dollars to the states and their respective irrigation systems, to do one thing—increase the efficiency of the irrigation systems, which, we are advised, if properly invested in, could result in 30 per cent greater efficiency as against the current water loss from often antiquated systems.

That is the first point.

The second is: what do you also do to draw down the overall take of water from the river system? That goes back to what I said before to the honourable member for Makin's question about the investments we have made in buying back water entitlements. They are the two practical measures which are currently underway.

On the cost-benefit analysis which the honourable member has asked about, I will seek to come back to him in terms of what we can do practically on that question, because, unlike those opposite, who simply howl in response to any question on the Murray-Darling, I take the member for New England's questions seriously because they are seriously intended. I believe he deserves a response on that question of the cost-benefit analysis.

Mr Windsor says that the answer, when it arrives, will be significant because it should draw a distinction between two forms of so called water loss from the catchment, both of which have very different potential solutions.

“The two issues of over-allocation based on historical flows and reduced inflows based on ‘Climate Change’ modelling should not be seen as one and the same.

“The Wentworth Group seems to see them in the same vein and views the solution to both as being through the buy back of licences.

“Clear data is needed to address this issue.

“How much water has been ‘over-allocated’ and how much water won't even enter the system due to Climate Change induced run-off projections?

“Once these figures are known a meaningful policy response can be developed.

“If the figures can't be obtained in a meaningful format, the premise on which both policies are based could be flawed,” Mr Windsor said.

Mr Windsor believes that the Climate Change component of the Murray Darling issue needs to be more clearly expressed.

“If, for example the loss of inflows of 2.5-4.5 thousand gigalitres is caused by human activity outside the catchment, could the solution be, to bring water into the system from areas where ‘Climate Change’ is going to cause greater quantities of water than would have historically occurred?

“The solution could be expensive but can we afford not to undertake it,” Mr Windsor said.