



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

Water

QUESTION

Wednesday, 20 October 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

QUESTION

Date Wednesday, 20 October 2010
Page 942
Questioner Gibbons, Steve, MP
Speaker

Source House
Proof No
Responder Burke, Tony, MP
Question No.

Water

Mr GIBBONS (Bendigo) (2.59 pm)—My question is to the Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities. Will the minister explain the government's approach to water reform and how these reforms have been received?

Mr BURKE (Watson—Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities)—I thank the member for Bendigo for the question. What needs to be recognised is that what we are trying to achieve, and what we have been trying to achieve since the Water Act was first introduced, is three outcomes: to deliver a healthy river system, to deliver it acknowledging the importance of food production and to deliver strong regional communities. That is the objective. That was the objective when the Water Act was first introduced and this government's determination to reach that objective is there as well. Anyone who saw the National Press Club address today would have seen the comments from the National Irrigators Council, from the National Farmers Federation and from the Australian Conservation Foundation—all agreeing with the importance of those three objectives.

Particularly yesterday, following some comments that were made in Senate estimates but also following some comments that were made by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority during its consultation, there was a level of concern and angst both within the parliament and throughout the community generally as to whether or not the act in its current form delivers on those three outcomes. I know the Leader of the Nationals has made comments on it. I know the member for Wentworth verbalised me in making comments on it on *PM* yesterday and in the *Herald* today—and he knows he has too. But there is a reasonable call for the issue to be clarified. There are two ways to deal with it. You can deal with it in the divisive way of those who have been unfairly, and I think in quite a mean way, describing the member for Wentworth as a roadblock, which I think is the cruelty of the National Party. But what we need to do is to have this issue clarified, because there is actually common ground on the three objectives. There is common ground on those three objectives in communities, through the peak bodies and, I believe, on both sides of this parliament.

Last Thursday I sought legal advice on this issue from my department. It has not yet come through. When it does come through, I think it will help inform the Murray-Darling Basin Authority, members of this parliament and the communities that are affected within the basin as to what the requirements of the act are and how the act plays a role in helping us deliver what is referred to as the triple bottom line approach—an approach that acknowledges that everybody needs the environmental outcome. The environmental outcome is important in itself but it is essential for the communities and essential for the irrigators, as is food production, as is having strong regional communities.

It is my intention, once that advice is available, to make it available both to the authority and generally. There is an argument going back and forth about what was intended. There are arguments and stories in today's *Sydney Morning Herald* about divisions within parties and across parties on whether or not the act needs to be changed. My view is: let's have a look at the legal advice. Let's see whether the different views that have been coming from the authority are backed up by the advice itself. Let's acknowledge that the government's triple bottom line approach of all three outcomes is what those in opposition once claimed they sought too when they were in government. It is certainly what the member for Wentworth sought and I hope it is what the Leader of the Opposition is willing to help deliver.