



The Hon. Tony Burke MP

T R A N S C R I P T

Interview with Deborah Cameron, ABC 702

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Subjects: Murray Darling Basin plan – consultations

E&OE only

CAMERON: The discussions about the Murray-Darling Basin have very much had the sort of feeling that there is a country-city divide. The city cameras go to those meetings that have been held in the basin areas, they capture pictures of very angry farmers hurling abuse at people who have been sent out there to try and get a Plan to push us forward into the next generation.

It's not really a them and us story. The future of the Basin, the future of the Murray-Darling, the compensation that might have to be paid to those who leave the land and the love of the river, if you're a tourist. All of those things will have to be shared equally by city dwellers in Australia.

So today the Murray-Darling Basing Authority is actually meeting, this afternoon, in Sydney.

To tell us more about expectations around these discussions, I'm joined this morning by Tony Burke, who is the Minister for Sustainable Population, Communities, Environment and Water. Minister good morning.

BURKE: G'day Deb.

CAMERON: Minister, it could easily be portrayed as a city-country divide, this debate.

BURKE: Yeah, I think some people have wanted to portray it as an old environment versus production sort of argument. It doesn't work that way. This is something where irrigators need there to be a healthy river as much as anybody else. I won't bombard you with statistics but there is one that always stays with me which is when salinity took over the Lower Lakes at the bottom of the river we went from 23 dairy farmers down to three.

Irrigators need to have a healthy river system, not a river system that is dying. So it is important that we deal with risk in a careful way, we want to optimise a whole lot of issues here. But the health of the river is not a city versus country issue at all.

CAMERON: Now today the Murray-Darling Basin Authority is meeting in Sydney. Can you tell us a bit about what you would expect to come out these discussions, from a city perspective today?

BURKE: Well, in order to have an interest in the Murray Darling Basin you simply have to be someone who eats – because a good proportion of our food comes from there.

There'll no doubt there will be people with different interests, there'll be people who want to make sure that we can find a way of restoring health to the Basin with as little negative impact on the irrigation industry as possible. There'll be people who view things purely from an environmental perspective.

We often talk about the mouth of the Murray and the Lower Lakes and the Coorong, which are magnificent places, but there are fantastic wetlands up and down the length of the Basin and there are environmental concerns that people have the whole way along.

I do believe we can work these through and I think the Sydney meeting will be an interesting one. I think anyone who expects it to be people just talking about environmental issues, I'd be very surprised if it comes out that way.

CAMERON: It's also interesting to think about the way we occupy ourselves. I think anyone who has a bit of spare money might be thinking of a holiday at Christmas time, a driving holiday or whatever they may do.

The Murray is one of those wonderful magnets for tourists everywhere and people in Sydney will have crossed the Murray or grown up along the Murray and come here to live. They'll have a real affinity to the river. There is a sort of feeling like this national asset is something that everyone has a stake in the future of.

BURKE: Yeah, you go to a place like Echuca, where they've still got the magnificent wharf, they're still handing out dvds of that mini-series, 'All the Rivers Run'.

There is an extraordinary part of the Australian story that has occurred along the Basin and there is a mix of industries that have grown up around it. You've got the irrigation industry, you've got a fantastic tourism industry which many people along the Basin will have special memories on. All of these industries come back to the one principle and that is that they rely on the health of the river system.

There is no argument about the fact that we managed the river as though state boundaries were relevant to a river system has resulted in massive overallocation and our environmental resources have been managed as well as they could be. There is a whole lot of mistakes that have been made and getting that river system back to health is the starting point of sustainability for all the industries that are there.

CAMERON: Now it's interesting to also think about the political balance because the loud minority of the farmers on the Murray, and others on the Murray, who have dominated some of the consultations. What they're on about might be quite different to what city voters, for example, might be interested in. As a politician perched in the middle looking at advice to make a decision in 12 months or so, wow do you think you are going to have to balance what city voters feel and what the rural voters might want for their immediate future?

BURKE: I think the real question here is to get the policy right. If you get the policy right the politics normally follows. For all of this the starting point of restoring the river system to health and doing it in a way where we deliver three things – a healthy river system, strong communities, and food production.

Now if you do those three, it doesn't matter where you live, whether you're in the Basin or outside it, you've got an interest in those three. There's a range of different efficiencies we can deal with, there is a range of works and measures in terms of managing the environmental assets more effectively, as well as the buybacks begin part of the suite of measures on the condition that we only ever buy water from someone who has chosen to put their water on the market. So there is a whole lot of things that can be done to ease the transition on this.

The bottom line is, I don't know when the next drought will come but I don't want it to look like the last drought. Unless we reform the Basin it will look exactly the same and the politics, the policy would be wrong if that's where we landed.

CAMERON: Minister, thank you very much for your time.

BURKE: Thank you very much.

CAMERON: The Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Tony Burke.

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