



The Hon. Tony Burke MP

T R A N S C R I P T

Interview with Steve Price on MTR

15 October 2010

Subjects: Murray Darling Basin plan – water allocations - consultations

E&OE only

STEVE PRICE: Ugly scenes all this week across communities along the Murray River, in particular on the border of Victoria and New South Wales. We started with the dairy farmer we spoke to on Monday. She turned up at a public meeting with the noose around her neck. That was in Shepparton. We spoke to communities in Mildura and Robinvale this week. We spoke to the National Farmers Federation.

This all then culminated in a meeting in Griffith yesterday where the Murray-Darling Basin Authority was trying to explain to farmers what they were doing with these reductions in their water allocations. There's a very ugly photograph on page one of the Australian today of farmers burning copies of that report. Here's some of what happened thanks to Channel 10 at the meeting.

[Excerpt]

VOX POP: The Government couldn't give a shit about what happens to us people here.

[Applause]

VOX POP: Basically the plan is bullshit.

VOX POP: Who is going to feed our growing population?

[Applause]

VOX POP: You have hurt the potential for the development of health services in this community and you have hurt my wife and family you sons of bitches.

VOX POP: Doctors and the mental health workers available here will not be able to contain the problem.

[End of excerpt]

STEVE PRICE: Rural anger. Tony Burke's the Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities. He's been good enough to contact us. Minister thanks for your time.

TONY BURKE: G'day Steve.

STEVE PRICE: Rural anger's not new in Australia but you seem to have really upset a lot of Australian families along the river. Why have you done that?

TONY BURKE: Well there is a lot of misinformation on this one and I'm grateful for the chance to be able to clear a few things up. First of all, what was released at the end of last week was not a government policy or a government proposal. An independent authority kicked off a period of consultation that goes for more than a year with their first draft. They called it a guide to a draft of the plan. That was what contained the cuts that have caused the concern that they have.

STEVE PRICE: This is the 27 to 37 per cent allocation cuts and the 8000 job loss prediction?

TONY BURKE: That's right. They're an independent authority. The Government's got no control over what they do and they don't represent Government policy. They've got a job to do under laws that have been in place since before we came to government but they've had the support of both sides of politics.

STEVE PRICE: So you didn't see that report before it went out?

TONY BURKE: I was given a copy arriving one day or two days before it was released.

STEVE PRICE: So why let it get released if it was containing information that you believe was not correct?

TONY BURKE: Oh well I've got no legal control over whether an independent authority releases something. It's like the Attorney-General trying to control a court.

STEVE PRICE: Did you predict though that it would cause this anger?

TONY BURKE: Oh absolutely. Absolutely. And this is why, if you look at any of the comments I made immediately before it came out and subsequently, I've been stressing the whole time this is not government policy, it's a guide to a draft of the plan. It's true though that we do need to reform the basin.

STEVE PRICE: So many someone from government needed though to turn up at some of these public meetings?

TONY BURKE: Well it's consultation being conducted by the authority on their work. They don't come when I'm out in irrigation communities when I'm doing my consultation and if I was there standing at the back, it really would undermine what's meant to be an independent authority. At the end of it all...

STEVE PRICE: I've had people crying and crying on the air. We've got the - you heard that audio there. People with nooses around their necks.

TONY BURKE: Yeah I know.

STEVE PRICE: Australian farmers setting fire to reports in the street. This really is ugly.

TONY BURKE: Yeah I know, and there's been some people who deliberately have presented this as though it were the Government's plan and that's helped with the

misinformation. The other thing that a lot of people have come to believe is that somehow the Government would take the water from them. That's not true.

Wherever the numbers end up, we only ever purchase from people who want to sell their water. If you don't put your water on the market the Government's not a buyer. There's not forced acquisition here at all and for a number of communities - not all - but for a number of communities - whatever the cuts are, a lot of the ground has already been made.

STEVE PRICE: But as you know, what happens in that circumstance is it sets farm against farm, community against community. Someone sells out, makes the town unviable and affects everyone else's business.

TONY BURKE: Oh and this is where I think a lot of the concern quite rightly needs to be directed at communities. It's one thing if an individual irrigator decides that they want to sell their water. In terms of the water market, we buy a very small fraction of what's on the market. Water gets traded up and down the basin all the time. But if an irrigator makes the decision that they want to sell, they've made that choice. But the rest of the town hasn't made that choice.

STEVE PRICE: But you know how this is being painted. It's being painted by your harshest critics as showing that you're beholden to Green policy, that you're more interested in returning environmental flows to the river than you are about jobs and communities. Now I know you and I know you don't think like that but that's how it's being painted.

TONY BURKE: Yeah, yeah I agree that that's how it's being painted. I don't think there's an interview I've done since I got this job well before I'd ever sighted a copy of this report. I don't think there's an interview that I've done where I haven't said there are three things we need if we're going to reform the basin. We need to have a healthy river. We need to have strong food production and we need to have strong communities. And unless you get all three, you don't have the balance right.

STEVE PRICE: So to put a lid on this now, Tony Windsor's going to get involved. Does that embarrass you?

TONY BURKE: Oh no, we've been talking to Tony for a little awhile. It's taken a while to lock down what the terms of reference would be but I think Tony Windsor is the perfect person to be able to deal with this.

If we try to deal with the problems of reform of the basin through just old style knock 'em down politics, we won't get anywhere and it doesn't do anyone in the basin any good. And I think Tony Windsor's the right sort of person, not from either side of politics. He can rise above and say well hang on, that we do need to have a healthy river, irrigators need the rivers system to be healthy as well, so let's work out a compromise that's sensible, that looks after the communities and that makes sure we - we're looking after the importance of producing food in this country.

STEVE PRICE: Okay. I know you've got to jump on a plane, we're going to talk to Tony Windsor later. Thanks for your time early this morning.

TONY BURKE: Good to talk to you Steve.

STEVE PRICE: Tony Burke there.

ENDS