



The Hon. Tony Burke MP

T R A N S C R I P T

Interview with Steve Price, MTR

9 December 2010

Subjects: Murray Darling Basin plan – WikiLeaks

E&OE only

STEVE PRICE: On the line is Tony Burke, the Federal Water Minister. There's been some obvious developments during the week, with the Murray-Darling Basin Authority boss, Mike Taylor, quitting, you wonder where that leaves Australia's water policy? Tony Burke, thanks for your time, appreciate it.

TONY BURKE: Good to be able to talk to you, Steve.

STEVE PRICE: Let's just get this out of the way, the Kevin Rudd, Mark Arbib WikiLeaks cables that are being published in the Sydney Morning Herald, and down here in the Melbourne Age, embarrassing for your Government, do you think?

TONY BURKE: Oh, we don't comment on the cables themselves, but certainly Mark Arbib's put out a statement today which I think's true, that there's a whole range of politicians and Members of Parliament, ministers, who talk to embassies and have good relationships particularly with our strongest ally, the United States.

STEVE PRICE: So do you have diplomats ringing you up all the time, wanting you to dish the dirt on your colleagues?

TONY BURKE: It depends on your portfolio as to what they're asking. Certainly there are a number of trade issues where different embassies have been in touch with me while I held the Agriculture portfolio. It's a little bit less now that I'm in the Environment portfolio, which is probably more focused right here at home.

STEVE PRICE: You heard a bit of Mark Baker there, do you support what the Fairfax papers are doing in publishing this material?

TONY BURKE: Look, we have said the whole way through this that we're not supportive of material that shouldn't have been released, being published.

STEVE PRICE: And have you spoken to Mark Arbib about this today?

TONY BURKE: No, no, I haven't.

STEVE PRICE: I mean is it something that within Government you're all sitting there, can't wait for tomorrow to see what comes out next?

TONY BURKE: To be honest on all of this, I've been getting on with my job, I think I've got enough on my plate with that.

STEVE PRICE: Now you've had your Murray-Darling Basin Authority boss, Mike Taylor quit this week, did they have it horribly wrong?

TONY BURKE: Certainly there's a strong difference of view between the Government and Mike Taylor as to what they're able to do under the Water Act, and under the Water legislation.

The simplest way of explaining that is we believe, and the Government's position has been that they can optimise your environmental outcome, and your economic and your social outcome. The Authority had a different view, and we sought independent legal advice to clarify it, it came down saying you can optimise all three. A whole lot of communities have been very frustrated believing that the impact on their towns wasn't going to be taken properly into account, and I just want to keep assuring people that it will be.

STEVE PRICE: It should never have got to the point, should it, where you have people wearing nooses around their necks, and burning piles of the report in Griffith in a bonfire?

TONY BURKE: Oh, the level of anxiety at those meetings was something that I agree with exactly the way you've described that there. You've got to remember, for these communities, a whole lot of them had just started to see a level of hope after a decade of drought, and then suddenly felt that the situation in that town wasn't going to be taken into account at all.

STEVE PRICE: So we've had an incredible rain event this week, we're coming out of the back of a once-in-a-generation drought, but the rivers are healthy, they're flowing, how are you now going to manage expectations? It must be very difficult.

TONY BURKE: This is - and there is a real difficulty with this

STEVE PRICE: I mean, are you going to go round buying water off people, when they've got flooded front yards, in many cases?

TONY BURKE: Yeah, well it's a situation when the rivers are flowing well, there's a whole lot less political pressure on going ahead with the reform, but it's actually the easiest time for communities to have a transition with water reform. I'm very mindful of the last three years, when I did have the Agriculture portfolio, of seeing exactly what that drought was like. In a nation like Australia, I don't think anyone's under any illusion, we don't know when the next drought will be, but we know it'll come, and I don't want the next one to look anything like the last one. I want to make sure we use the opportunity we've got now, rather than just reaching for the brake on reform, use the opportunity now to make sure the next drought doesn't look like the last one.

STEVE PRICE: Good to catch up, I know you're out on the road. Thanks a lot.

TONY BURKE: Thanks, Steve.

STEVE PRICE: Tony Burke, Federal Water Minister.

ENDS