



The Hon. Tony Burke MP

T R A N S C R I P T

The Hon Tony Burke MP Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities

Murray Darling Basin, Water Act, construction of new dams, natural disaster recovery, alpine grazing

E&OE Transcript

Interview on Australian Agenda with Peter Van Onselen

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PETER VAN ONSELEN: Welcome back, this is Australian Agenda where I am joined by my colleagues at the Australian, Matthew Franklin and Paul Kelly and we're now joined here in the studio by the Federal Environment and Water Minister, Tony Burke...Thanks for your company.

TONY BURKE: Good to be here.

PETER VAN ONSELEN: Can I start by asking you...we had Barry O'Farrell on before talking state politics ...an old state Labor mate of yours Craig...Craig Knowles I should say, you have...how quickly we forget, that you've appointed to aah to the Murray Darling Basin, Basin Authority. How wise is that politically at a time when NSW Labor is, lets face it, pretty toxic to bring in one of their one time heavy hitters and ahh and stick him in such a high profile position for you guys, Federally.

TONY BURKE: I think ahh you you can overplay the mate part of it and if you saw the community meetings at the end of last year, this is hardly a favour to a mate that you give a job like that to. Aaahh...

PETER VAN ONSELEN: Why did he take it then?

TONY BURKE: I think the...I think the...He's had a commitment to water reform from the beginning, together with John Anderson aah.. he very much drove the beginning of the National Water Initiative and I think the common sense of an appointment like that is made clear by the third party endorsements. If you've got the National Farmer's Federation, The Irrigators Council, The Conservation Foundation and John Anderson saying that this is the right appointment then the fact that you get a bit of criticism from the Federal Opposition I think you can...you can roll with.

PAUL KELLY NATIONAL POLITICAL EDITOR, THE AUSTRALIAN: Minister, if we just aah look at the aah, next upcoming report what are the sort of changes that you would like to see...the changed approach that you would like to see under Craig Knowles in terms of addressing this issue?

TONY BURKE: The... the next report is the first one that is actually part of the statutory process aahh, and it is the draft plan aah, now my expectation is that aah we are now be... over the legal arguments of what you take into account, what you don't and we will have something that does a simple part of the reform and that is attempts to optimise the environmental, the economic and the social outcomes. The arguments that we had towards the end of last year that somehow you could ignore the impact on communities, simply look at the environment, aah and then deal with the others as an after thought was never going to be a sensible way of driving reform.

PAUL KELLY AND MATTHEW FRANKLIN (IN UNISON): But isn't the.... (Matthew Franklin interjects)...process then wasn't it?

TONY BURKE: Well aah, there was a view that the Authority took that didn't match the view of the government or the view of the Opposition or the view of communities or the view of the Australian Government solicitor as to what their job actually was.

PAUL KELLY: Well if I can just go to the a view of the government. Is the view of the government that the Water Act gives primacy...gives legal primacy to environmental factors?

TONY BURKE: Now the water act allows you to optimise all three, that's what it does. It's a piece of environmental legislation. That's true. It draws on International Environmental Instruments. That's true, But even those instruments, the international ones, RAMSAR Convention and others, take in to account the social and economic impacts when you're setting your environmental limits; so there's easily enough discretion to make sure that we are getting healthy rivers, strong communities and sustainable food production if the process is carried out sensibly...(Paul Kelly interrupts)...

PAUL KELLY: Well just on these issues there is quite a lot of advice to the contrary, to the contrary to what you just said aahh..that is Professor George Williams has aah made clear his view, the Productivity Commission has outlined earlier on its own view and those views are, those view are that when you look at that Act over all what it means is... that while all factors have got to be optimised at the end of the day primacy needs to be given to environmental factors....now you're rejecting that are you?

TONY BURKE: Yeah I am and there's... there's a bit of a slight of hand in some, how some of those conclusions are reached. Aah, when you look at the term in the Act – minimum environmental levels – there's actually a series of discretionary processes leading up to working that out where you do cate.. take social and economic impacts into account even in setting the environmental impact level, so there's a bit of opting in and out of legal language when people have run the arguments that you've just referred to.

MATTHEW FRANKLIN, CHIEF POLITICAL CORRESPONDENT, THE AUSTRALIAN: At the end of all of this, however long the process lasts, aahh, the government is going to have to make some tough decisions. Do you have the guts to make those decisions and aahh are you prepared to put voters offside?

TONY BURKE: We... We need to make tough decisions on Murray Darling, make no mistake...getting a...a new chair in and agreeing on the legal framework doesn't mean suddenly we aah have a simple reform. This has been mismanaged for a century and when you have over extraction you don't just get bad environmental outcomes, you get bad outcomes for irrigators....Down in the Lower lakes aahh during the last drought we went from 23 dairy farmers down to 3 as the salinity levels rose... Whenever you have algae blooms the water becomes almost useless to irrigators in those regions. There is a very real need for reform and the one thing that we must make sure of is that we don't lose the appetite for reform simply because at this point in time there is some water in the system.

MATTHEW FRANKLIN: Speaking of mismanagement in um... in the water policy area, the Opposition, particularly Barnaby Joyce ah Barnaby Joyce have been running hard during this um... recent ... recent wet months about [stutter] the fact that there's all this water flying past people's properties um... out into the ocean or wherever and not enough dams have been built in this time, in the last few decades. Do you acknowledge that that's a problem and um... what [stutter] what do you think causes it? Is it the fact that the adversarial nature of politics means you simply don't get a dam proposal up in this country?

TONY BURKE: Oh no, look, and I've ... I've been hoping for a dam question for about two months, so thank you Matthew. Ah... first of all, the last two proposals for dams have come from State Labor Governments and have been campaigned against by Barnaby Joyce.

MATTHEW FRANKLIN: Yeah but I... I'm not... I want [inaudible]

TONY BURKE: interrupts] ... And I appreciate that but there's ah part of the argument that you just referred to is a claim that Labor somehow has a phobia against dams. Simply not true, the last two proposals have come from Labor governments. Um...

PETER VAN ONSELEN: Would you like to see a dam built, ah or start being built, during the time that you are Environment Minister?

TONY BURKE: If you can get the right loca... there's a limited number of places where the typography is right to be able to be able to build a dam. A limited number of places. Ah if proposals can come forward... ah from from State Governments, that's where they *need* to come from, they're the ones that build dams... ah then there's no instinctive objection, and I've been saying this for more than three years, there's no automatic objection from the Labor Government.

PAUL KELLY: But in terms of your own personal approach, do you *think* that the construction of new dams would be a good idea?

TONY BURKE: I... [stutter] if you can get them in the right location, it can be but you also need to make clear what the purpose of the dam is. There's been some mixing of the three different purposes of dams, you know; dams for hydro, dams for water storage, dams for flood mitigation. Now depending on the purpose, you run the dam completely differently. If it's for hydro, you need a continuous flow of water, if it's for water storage you try to keep it as full as possible, ah... if it's for flood mitigation you keep it as empty as possible. In some of the arguments Barnaby's been talking about he's been talking about dams that are *always* flowing, always empty and always full. And so it's not as simple as it's made out to be but in terms of, if a proposal comes forward in the right location where you can make it work, do I have any instinctive problem with there being the building of a dam? The answer to that is no.

MATTHEW FRANKLIN: [interrupts] Well, just on this issue... of the um... of the difficulty politically, for state governments to get a proposal up... um... is there a role for you as... as Water Minister at a federal level, to take some kind of leadership here? Because you seem to be unable to get past the fact that no government wants to propose putting a dam in place when it will cost them seats.

TONY BURKE: Oh... as I say, the... in the last couple of years there have been two very significant proposals for dams that have both come forward from state governments so, I don't necessarily accept the premise of that. [pause] Ah... There are a limited number of locations where you can effectively get the typography right to have a significant dam. You've got to work out what the actual objective is, 'cause you're not going to be running... able to simultaneously run it all three ways as I just described.

MATTHEW FRANKLIN: [interrupts] Does that mean no, you don't want to provide leadership on dams?

TONY BURKE: Oh... I'm not going to pretend that I have the power as a Federal Minister to go beyond what's my constitutional power. Now, the truth is, if you want to build a dam, you need a state government willing to build it. Ah... now... there's different dam proposals where... for example, Chaffey Dam, ah... relevant for the New England area, where we had an election promise about expanding it. You know, sometimes it's not a matter of building a new dam, sometimes you can expand what's already there, and get a more effective outcome.

PAUL KELLY: What are the longer term policy implications for the Commonwealth in terms of these natural disasters the cyclones and the floods that we've seen during the summer?

TONY BURKE: Um the the impact is normally able to be dealt with ah from the contingency reserve ah from time to time you get an extraordinary event and that's not simply extraordinary in terms of the impact on the elements but also physically where it's located will impact on ah how much in terms of infrastructure gets taken out so the recent Queensland floods won't only weren't only extraordinary because of the the verocity of what nature was doing but also it hit so many urban areas you had a whole lot more infrastructure that was being taken out. So the financial impact of this particular weather event ah is is unusual in the ordinary event the contingency reserve that's kept in place is able to cover for natural disasters.

PAUL KELLY: Well can I just ask do you attribute these events to climate change factors?

TONY BURKE: Oh Paul I think I do believe you've got to be really careful in mixing con conversations about climate with conversations about weather events. Ah climate is about your overall trend and individual weather events you can never pinpoint this is a climate change one you can't pick this is a climate change drought or this is a climate change flood or anything like that. Ah climate change...

PETER VAN ONSELEN: Well Kevin Rudd did a fair bit of that in Question Time.

TONY BURKE: Yeah and er ah the the concept is very much you can't disengage them completely either...

PAUL KELLY: Sure

TONY BURKE: ...because the trend is about the trend of weather events. So all I'm saying is if you want me to pick an individual weather event and say was that caused by climate change I don't believe that's a question I'm able to answer.

PAUL KELLY: OK, OK.

PETER VAN ONSELEN: Can I ask you minister this is quite a boutique issue but it's a big issue for people in Victoria and it's alpine grazing. Let's make sure I didn't accidentally call it alpine skiing. The the the issue is that the the former Labor government at state level banned it for environmental reasons the new Ted Baillieu

led Liberal government has brought in a trial ah that they say is selective they say it doesn't tread on federal responsibilities and that they have the right to do it. Do they legally in your view have the right to do it?

TONY BURKE: Look on the on the legal part of that I have I can't prejudge that decision. That decision will come to me ah my department is currently preparing advice on it but I have to be very careful to have not prejudged the legality of what the Victorian government is currently doing.

PETER VAN ONSELEN: OK if not the legal side of it what about just your view on alpine grazing. Is it something that is bad for the environment and shouldn't happen or are you OK about it even in a trial context?

TONY BURKE: OK yeah well it it may or may not hit that legality hurdle and I'll I'll deal with that later. Look I I do appeal to the Victorian government just to be sensible on this and to not play games. I mean at at its heart we are talking about a national park not a farm.

PETER VAN ONSELEN: OK ah well but does that mean to you if we are talking about a national park and not a farm you are fundamentally opposed to it it's a matter for you about whether or not you have the legal power with that personal view to cut it to stop it.

TONY BURKE: Oh the the legal issue I'm keeping completely separate. I'll wait until I see the advice. If it's breached federal environmental law then there's an issue for me to deal with. If it hasn't breached federal environmental law then this is one of the things that happens when you get a change of government.

PETER VAN ONSELEN: OK one final question if I could because we are almost out of time. Generally politically at the moment a problem for the government is appearing competent whether you accept the thesis or not that's an issue. How are you guys as a government going to get over that hurdle so that voters listen and believe rather than are naturally cynical?

TONY BURKE: I think the the core obligation on us is to get on and do the job. I can talk as much as I want about the principles of Murray Darling reform. What will matter is as the form is reform progresses and people see it. That's going to be the key. It's not there's there's no set of words I can put together that is nearly as powerful as reform occurring.

PETER VAN ONSELEN: All right minister thank's for very much for joining us. Good luck in parliament next week. I'm sure it's going to be a pretty fiery start. We appreciate your company on Australian Agenda.

TONY BURKE: Good to be back.

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