



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

## New Murray-Darling Basin Authority Chair

E&OE Transcript  
Press conference  
28 January 2011

**BURKE:** Thank you very much for joining us. As you'd be aware towards the end of last year Mr Mike Taylor tendered his resignation as head of the Murray Darling Basin Authority, and indicated that he was willing to stay around to ensure a smooth transition while the Government determined who would be the new chair.

Today, I'm very pleased to announce that the Government has asked Craig Knowles to take that position. Craig has been in water reform since it's beginning. You go through the Hansard, you go through the public comments, you'll find comment after comment about the fact that the National Water Initiative had its initial momentum from work and a partnership across political lines between John Anderson and Craig Knowles.

That puts Craig in an unusual position where not only has he had ministerial responsibility for water, but he knows the story of water reform from the beginning.

There was, towards to end of last year, a high level of concern from members of the community, particularly regional communities, that they didn't believe the consultation or the full analysis had taken place in the release of the guide.

I always took the view that the Murray Darling Basin Authority was an independent authority. The Guide was never a government policy document but I was deeply

concerned about the criticisms that were coming from communities where they believed their views hadn't properly been taken into account.

Craig has a strong record of a consultative style. I think it is exactly what we need. He understands the issues of water, he's worked on them both as they apply to NSW and at a national level. He's been able to reach across political divides, and I'm very pleased to be able to announce Craig Knowles as the new chair of the Murray Darling Basin Authority, with the responsibility now of making sure that we do deliver on those requirements that I've been talking about since day one in the job. We want to make sure that we have healthy rivers, strong communities and sustainable food production.

**QUESTION:** You talk about the authority being independent and yet you've put in charge a former Labor politician, how can you really say that it's fully independent?

**BURKE:** Well it's an independent body by law, I don't think you can get around that.

Lets not forget that this is the same government that has been responsible for appointing Peter Costello, Brendan Nelson, Tim Fisher to different roles. We make sure that if there is somebody who is the right person for the job, then we ask them whether they are willing to take it. I think it's a real privilege that Craig said yes.

**QUESTION:** Should it be a politician though or should it be an expert in some of the fields.

**BURKE:** It's been a long time since Craig's been a politician and for a very long time he's been an expert in the field, so I think to take the premise of your question, we are delivering on it. Can I ask Craig to say a few words before we go?

**KNOWLES:** Look I'm delighted to take up the role asked by the Minister.

I just want to send a message out to rural and regional Australia. My track record here is about bipartisan approach to resource management. I have worked with governments of all persuasions over many years to deliver good common sense approaches to natural resource management and that's the record. It stands and speaks for itself.

I will work on a balanced approach; I will work with communities hard and solid and decently to make sure that we deliver on those trio of objectives; good environmental outcomes, good social outcomes and strong economies for rural and regional Australia. You can't have a healthy river without a healthy economy and you can't have a healthy economy without a healthy river. And they go together, like a hand in a glove, like two sides of the same coin, I'm very comfortable that the legislation gives me the scope to do that work in that spirit.

I will work with good people where ever they might be found to deliver on the objectives. I want to get on with it quickly because uncertainty creates anxiety in

communities and we will do that working together with goodwill and with decency. That's my pledge.

**QUESTION:** The Irrigators Council have welcomed your appointment; they've also said the scrap the Murray Darling Plan and go back to the drawing board, what are your thoughts about that?

**KNOWLES:** I appreciate the number of positive comments that have come from right across the spectrum from the environmental groups through to the farming and irrigator groups and indeed Tony Windsor, so I thank them all for their initial support, we'll work hard together. We will work on the future, I know that there has been a lot of stress and tension and you only had to turn on your TV's last year to see it but in the end everyone wants a result here and we'll work together, and we'll do it to achieve a balanced approach. A balance between environmental, social and economic outcomes.

**QUESTION:** Mr Knowles I was going to ask you a question on the NSW opposition, are you bothered by it? There are comments on you're...

**KNOWLES:** It's been a long time since I've been in parliament, they didn't bother me then, but now I will work with anyone and everyone. I think, really having been out of public life for a long time and travelling around rural Australia as I like to do, I know that the communities around Australia expect their governments and their oppositions and their various statutory authorities to work together in their interests.

So I will pledge to work with anyone, solidly and decently to develop and deliver on those balanced outcomes we talked about. That's what rural communities' want that's what Australians want and in the end that's what I've been asked to deliver and I will work hard with all that I can give to do just that.

**QUESTION:** You mention about meeting that balance and it was one of the reasons the previous chairman actually quit so it that sort of toeing the line for the government?

**KNOWLES:** No I just disagree with Mike Taylor. Let's be frank about that.

I've delivered on a lot of environmental legislation over the years in forestry and natural resource management, native vegetation, water and all of those international agreements; all those environmental imperatives are found in every piece of legislation. The Water Act is no different.

I'm very comfortable that the scope of the legislation, the objectives of the legislation talk about optimising the economic, social and environmental outcomes is as plain as day.

But let me also say this; this can turn into a lawyers picnic if people want it to be. But all that's going to do it make a whole lot of lawyers rich. What I want to do is work with communities. I'll be on the road, I'll be out there talking to communities,

environmental groups, farmers, irrigators, local councils, Country Women's Associations; whoever wants to turn up and have a say, I'm there to listen to get a balanced solution. Common sense, practical, balanced solutions. Because in the end that's what has to be delivered here. And I will work within that spirit with anyone who wants to work with me.

**QUESTION:** With that in mind then, does the actual document need redrafting?

**KNOWLES:** Well, as the Minister's indicated the guide is just that, it has no more status than that. I have the great luxury as the new boy on the block to be able to say very factually, I don't have a lot of skin in that game; I don't have a great sense of ownership of the guide. My job starts from now looking forward and that's what I'll do. I'll take all the information in that document and all the science and all the submissions that people have made and I'll consider them but I'll also consider what I find when I hit the ground, when I talk to towns, when I talk to communities when I talk to people who've got something to say.

**QUESTION:** And what's in for the next few days? A hand over? when are you hoping to get out on the ground?

**KNOWLES:** Well I've already sent messages out to a number of the key constituency groups on the environment and irrigation and farming side, Tony Windsor that I'd like to talk with them as soon as possible.

I'll be in Canberra early next week to meet the Authority staff and we'll get the show going. We'll do it as quick as well possibly can, my pledge to myself and to country people is to do it within the time frame because I know that the best thing we can do is deliver and end uncertainty in their lives. Reduce the anxiety in their lives and in that sense I'll be moving pretty quickly, but I will not do it without talking to people and listening to what they've got to say and giving them a chance to understand very clearly, very clearly that my agenda is a balanced approach, managing the environment, managing the economies of rural and regional Australia and managing the social impacts. They are the three things that are front and centre in my mind, they are there in the Act, they are there in the way I've operated for more than a decade in natural resource management and that's the approach I'll bring to this job.

**QUESTION:** Can I ask you another question Minister, just now with that in mind, I mean it almost does sound like a line you were talking about last year when the former chairman quit that is finding the balance between the economics, have you found the right approach for the Basin now?

**BURKE:** Well certainly the Act provides an opportunity towards the end of this year for direct intervention by me if the work has somehow, after I've met with my ministerial colleagues from other states, needs further intervention. But my view has always been the best outcomes for the process to work, the best outcome is for the consultation from the Murray Darling Basin Authority to happen in a way that gives

real confidence to communities about their future. I'm very confident that Craig's the right person to deliver that.

**QUESTION:** And your position on what the opposition in NSW is saying here that it's very much political and jobs for the boys?

**BURKE:** After a while you get used to the fact that at the moment the Liberal and National Parties have an instinctive opposition to everything. It really doesn't matter what you announce they put out a media release slamming it at the moment. But lets look at people who have been working in water reform for a long time, look at the view of the National Irrigators Council, look at the views of the National Farmers Federation, look at the views of John Anderson, hardly a Labor stooge.

The people who have worked with Craig Knowles and the people who have seen his record to water reform I think know a whole lot more about what can now be delivered than a few political games from the Liberal and National Party.

**ENDS**