

Murray-Darling Basin (Amending Agreement) Amendment Bill 2006
19 September 2006

The Hon. A.L. EVANS:

I rise to indicate Family First support of this Bill.

About two weeks ago, I had the opportunity of visiting some constituents at Walker Flat on the Murray River. It's a beautiful area – the river at this township is bounded with tall iridescent cliffs. There is nothing more serene than a picture of a sunset hitting the cliffs, as the calm and sheltered Murray flows beneath. We are privileged in South Australia to have such a wonder of creation as the Murray River, and we have an obligation to protect it.

Historically, the management of the River Murray has been a source of friction between New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. The Murray was a major means of transport, and many clauses were negotiated into the Commonwealth Constitution to deal with that issue. In the 1880s, when the first major diversions of water from the Murray for irrigation started occurring, other conflicts developed.

As is happening today – crises brought the colonies together. In the late 19th century, the crisis was a severe drought that extended from 1895 to 1902. Today, the crisis is the poor health of the River.

In 1915 the River Murray Waters Agreement was signed by the Commonwealth Governments, and the governments of New South Wales, Victoria, and South Australia. That agreement was superseded by the Murray-Darling Basin Agreement of 1992, and the Murray-Darling Basin Act of 1993.

The Snowy Mountains Hydroelectric Scheme was corporatised in 2002, and that corporatisation has resulted in required changes to the 1992 agreement. For some time there were more than 30 separate intergovernmental and commercial licensing contracts drawn up to ensure minimum annual water releases to the Murray and Murrumbidgee systems. In order to provide

enduring safeguards, the new arrangements were enshrined in the Murray-Darling Basin Agreement Amending Agreement 2002, which South Australia became a signatory to on the 14th of April 2002. Clause 6 of the 1992 Act requires that any amendments to the Agreement be submitted to Parliament for ratification – and that is why we are here, belatedly, today. I note that the New South Wales, Victorian and Commonwealth Parliaments have already passed their respective legislation.

I am very concerned for the health of the River. There are stories by old residents along the River, who say that when they were young they could stand waist deep in the River and see their feet through the crystal clear water. I've also heard that Aborigines could stand on the shore and spear Murray Cod by sight in the River. Nowadays, the River is so murky that you struggle to see your own hand held just below the surface.

This year has been a particularly tough year - we are told that rainfall in the Murray-Darling basin in the nine months to August is in the lowest 10 per cent of all recorded rainfalls for the catchment. In a previous season, I believe we had a situation where the Darling saw so little rainfall that the Murray was flowing backwards.

We've already seen the death of the Colorado River in the U.S., which runs through the Grand Canyon – but no longer reaches the sea. The Soviets have wiped the Aral Sea from the face of the Earth. That was a result of improper water allocations to their cotton farmers. I would encourage and support the government in taking whatever steps are necessary to save the Murray from a similar fate.

This Bill is a small piece in the puzzle when it comes to the health of the Murray. Many say that The Murray-Darling Basin Initiative doesn't go far enough. But at least it's a step in the right direction.

I understand that the Opposition does not oppose the Bill, and neither, at this stage, does Family First.