

The new Water Minister has a chance to wean Adelaide off the Murray River

Jennifer Marohasy

Water politics has a tendency to be deeply parochial—federal politicians support their home state at the expense of good public policy.

But the new Rudd government's water agenda claims to be truly national. And for once there may be an interest in Canberra on water issues in Australia's state capital cities as well as in the Murray Darling Basin.

Nevertheless, the new water minister, Penny Wong, is from South Australia and there has been some mumbling—mostly behind closed doors in Victoria and New South Wales—that South Australian politicians are inevitably parochial when it comes to water. The newly elected independent South Australian Senator Nick Xenophon—who may hold the balance of power in the new Senate—has been

more open about his views, and promised to be parochial. How this new era in Australian water politics plays out could potentially define national water policy for decades.

South Australians live at the end of the Murray River system and many live in fear that someone upstream will steal their water before it makes it to the end of the system. So they tend to have a special interest in water politics—as far back as federation the state has sought to have its perceived water rights enshrined nationally. There are now national agreements specifying how New South Wales and Victoria service South Australia's water entitlement. South Australian politicians, like all politicians, seem to always be on the lookout for any opportunity to further secure their entitlement.

There were several South Australian ministers within the Howard cabinet and they were always quick to scuttle any proposals that did not suit South Aus-

tralia's water agenda. For example when the Commonwealth Standing Committee on Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries handed down an interim report in March 2004 emphatically stating that the scientific evidence did not support various claims which would have resulted in more environmental flow for South Australia, then Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, very quickly and very publicly had the reports findings quashed.

Even the geography of the Murray River itself has been altered by political maneuvering. When Charles Stuart first navigated the Murray in 1831 he determined that the River ended at Wellington, but this has been renegotiated over time by the South Australians—the estuarine lake system below Wellington is now also considered part of the river system and thus entitled to a water allocation from upstream.

Soon after becoming the water minister in the new Rudd government, Wong

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met with South Australian irrigators; and, according to one leading irrigator, Tim Whetstone, a solid platform for further discussions was established which including the need for water reform within the Murray Darling Basin. Of course 'water reform' within the Murray Darling Basin has been on the national agenda since federation and much progress has already been made. Over the last twenty years there has been the salinity and drainage strategy of 1988, imposition of a national cap on extractions in 1995, an inquiry into the restoration of flows to the Snowy in 1998 and in June 2004 the Howard government announced a new 'National Water Initiative' and then in January 2007 a 'National Plan for Water Security'.

Announcements from federal Labor before the recent election correctly explained that the Howard government's \$10 billion 'National Plan for Water Security' is designed primarily to address water issues in the Murray Darling Basin but that there is also a need to address 'the water crisis in our coastal towns and cities where 18 million Australians live'. Indeed, as recently as January 2007, Prime Minister John Howard was talking about the impossible dream of drought-proofing the Murray Darling Basin, rather than, for example, taking any interest in the possibility that one of the nation's fastest-growing cities, Brisbane, could run out of water.

Both Brisbane and Adelaide lie about 100 kilometres outside the Murray Darling Basin catchment area proper. However, despite its distance, Adelaide has an historic water property right to the Murray River's water and draws 40 to 90 per cent of its water supply from the river. Successive South Australian governments have resisted calls to make their capital less dependent on the river by moving to waste water recycling or desalination.

In the lead up to the recent federal election, Labor promised a \$1 billion National Urban Water and Desalination Plan to help secure the water supplies of Australia's major cities with centres of excellence in desalination in Perth and a centre of excellence in water recycling in Brisbane—acknowledging these cities as leaders in these respective fields. It is unclear what Nick Xenophon's position is on the often controversial issue of drinking recycled water. His focus so far has been on the Murray River and, if his media releases are to be believed, the hardship recently experienced by South Australian irrigators has nothing to do with the drought—or even climate change—but everything to do with bad decisions made in Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra that disadvantaged South Australians. Xenophon launched his campaign for the Senate in front of the giraffe enclosure at the Adelaide Zoo, explaining that he had decided to run for federal politics so he could stick his neck out for South Australia nominating water as an issue he wants to 'fight on'.

The Howard government's 'National Plan for Water Security' included various initiatives of potential benefit to South Australians, for example, the digging of a channel to bypass the Barnmah Choke—a constriction in the Murray River which has historically made it difficult to get large volumes of water from Hume and Dartmouth Dams down the river quickly. The Victorian government did not sign up to John Howard's National Plan and is now proposing to pipe water from the Murray to Melbourne.

Xenophon argues that the Commonwealth should use its Constitutional power to force Victoria to come to the party on the \$10 billion initiative. To be sure, Murray Darling Basin water politics is unlikely to disappear from discussions in the national capital anytime soon, but it is in the national interest that the focus

starts to move to issues of more relevance in the 21st century—in particular, the vital question of how to secure urban water supplies into the future without relying on inland rivers whose flow is potentially impacted by drought. The new federal government's water proposal shows it is possible for both Melbourne and Adelaide to provide water to their residents and industries without drawing on the Murray.

Of course there will always be those who will campaign against obvious measures such as waste water recycling and desalination.

In Brisbane the issue of drinking waste water became a non-issue as water restrictions moved from level 4 to level 5 and then 6 in 2007 and the state government's position changed from promising a referendum on the issue of 'drinking sewage' to announcing the inevitability of it. Perth already has a desalination plant operating and it claims to be greenhouse neutral. With Labor in power in all Australian states, territories and federally perhaps there is now even less potential for controversy over these new technologies and they can start to be fast-tracked.

The Rudd government and 2008 promise a new era in water politics—and hopefully one that begins to look north where most of our water falls, rather than always south. After all, paddle steamers are no longer important for inland trade and Adelaide can perhaps at last look beyond the Murray River for its water supply. Cities like Brisbane and Perth are leading the way and Penny Wong, as the new national water minister, can get behind their efforts and extend their progress nationally. Perhaps as Adelaide becomes less dependent on the Murray River, South Australia can start to worry less about perceived upstream threats and Australian water politics can become much less parochial.

