

There are Votes in the Murray

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WHAT exactly is the water problem in Australia?' asked the Prime Minister John Howard. 'There is simply not enough,' replied Peter Garrett, then President of the Australian Conservation Foundation. After consulting water expert Professor Peter Cullen, Asa Wahlquist reported the solution in *The Australian* newspaper the very next day: 'Grow more wine and eat less rice.'

It is Cullen's contention that we can save water in the Murray-Darling Basin by growing higher value crops, in particular wine grapes. And there are those who insist that rice growing should be banned altogether.

While concerned greens may be keen to sip champagne for breakfast, rather than crunch rice bubbles—all in the name of doing the right thing by the environment—is this really a sustainable approach?

On 3 August, Greenpeace, the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) and the Wilderness Society launched their joint policy for the Federal election—describing it as the environmental issue that will drive voting at the election. They are saving the Murray River, ending logging of old-growth forests in Tasmania and 'tackling' climate change.

While there are substantial differences between political parties on the issues of climate change and Tasmania's forests, the Coalition, Labor Party and Greens are all committed to saving the Murray River. Remarkably, the only real policy difference is the amount of water to be saved, with the Greens arguing for six times the quantity of water (3,000 gegalitres) already commit-

ted by the Prime Minister (500 gegalitres).

The Murray River has been a focus of ACF campaigning for over 10 years. Why does it remain such a key national environmental issue? The belief that irrigation along the Murray River is unsustainable and has resulted in a degraded and degrading river system is the most powerful force not only for taking water off Murray River irrigators, but also for regulating farming across Australia.

For example, in the Northern Territory, Chief Minister Claire Martin recently reaffirmed that she will stand by her decision to ban the growing of cotton. In November last year, her government placed a moratorium on irrigation developments in the Daly River Catchment following intense lobbying from environmentalists who claimed that watering thirsty crops had 'devastated' the Murray River in distant South Eastern Australia. Another example is a new \$22 million CSIRO research effort focused on saving our water resources, in part, by increasing agricultural water-use efficiencies. Successful agriculture, however, is about much more than how much water a crop uses.

Centrally planned agriculture failed in Eastern Europe, yet it is being tried on Australian farmers in the name of 'saving water'. Farmers, rather than the environmentalists, might just be the best placed to decide whether they grow rice or wine grapes given available markets, together with an individual farm enterprise's land and financial capability and water allocation.

One of the most defining characteristics of water in the Australian landscape is flow variability. In

the poem 'My Country', Dorothea McKellar appropriately describes Australia as a land 'of drought and flooding rains'. Reflecting this variability, water allocation can be severely restricted in drought years like the present, even though water storage capacity in the Murray Darling Basin is approximately 25 per cent of annual average runoff. Paradoxically, rice growers easily cope with this by simply not planting a crop. In contrast, South Australian wine grape growers bleat loudly because their perennial crop needs water every year.

There are those who believe that, as inhabitants of the oldest, driest and most fragile continent on Earth, we should ban European-style agriculture altogether and presumably, along with much of the rest of the world, import our food.

Australia contributed approximately 14 per cent of the wheat traded globally last financial year—and this during a drought year. And yes, we currently even export rice to Asia. Rice production in the Murray-Darling Basin over the last 10 years was enough to feed almost 40 million people a meal each day, every day of the year. It is predicted that Asia's demand for food—including wheat, beef and milk—will grow by more than 20 per cent by 2010. These estimates are probably conservative.

So, just how can Australia, the driest inhabited continent on earth, feed so much of the world? Can there be any water left over for the environment?

According to the World Resource Institute, Australia has 51,000 litres of available water per capita per day. This is one of the highest levels in the world, after

Russia and Iceland, and well ahead of countries such as Indonesia (33,540), the United States (24,000), China (6,000) and the United Kingdom (only 3,000 litres per capita per day). Furthermore, according to the Federal Government's Australian Water Resources Assessment 2000, we divert only five per cent of the average annual national runoff—most of the rain falls across northern Australia. So, effectively, 95 per cent of the rain that falls is 'for the environment'.

Incredibly, nobody has an accurate fix on how much water is already allocated for environmental flows in the Murray–Darling Basin. Wetland working groups and forest management committees already control many hundreds of gegalitres of water, and this quantity will increase under the newly signed and much trumpeted National Water Initiative. This environmental water, however, doesn't appear on any general ledger. The focus is always on how much water *irrigators* extract. In wet years, there has been enough water for rice, wine and red gums. In dry years, there has been less water for red gums and none for rice in New South Wales. South Australian farmers, however, are assured of almost 100 per cent of their allocation, even during the recent very dry years. This is how the water allocation system works.

The environmental lobby recently suffered a setback when the Chair of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry explained in the Foreword to *Getting Water Right(s): The future of rural Australia*, 'The Committee is not swayed by the emotions of some commentators who portray the River Murray as dead or dying. Indeed, the steady flows in the River Murray today are in stark contrast to the trickle reported by Sturt in his journals more than a century and a half ago ... significant progress which has been achieved in other areas of river health, such

as controlling salinity, should be more widely acknowledged and recognized.'

Unable to successfully push the lie of declining water quality on all governments in the lead-up to the last two Council of Australian Government (COAG) meetings, Professor Cullen and other members of the Wentworth Group of Scientists (funded by the World Wide Fund for Nature), recently changed tack and are now telling us that climate change means there will now be much less water. In direct contradiction of these predictions, the

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June 2004 issue of *Australasian Science* reported that, 'A meeting of almost 100 Australian climatologists has concluded that the world is getting wetter as it gets warmer'. There is really no coherent picture of regional climate change. Even the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) concedes this, and CSIRO Atmospheric Research acknowledges that this is particularly the case for rainfall.

Putting the facts of the matter aside, the environmental lobby is clearly intent on exploiting the concept of a dying Murray River—now so firmly a part of the national psyche—as a campaign platform for the upcoming election. *The Australian* newspaper will run the stories. This newspaper has made 'Saving the Murray' its official environmen-

tal issue since February 2001, presumably on the basis that it has general appeal to the readership.

All our political parties have agreed to save the Murray River, with the amount of water to be saved the only distinguishing issue. Environmentalism is increasingly about the perception of what is morally right and wrong—rather than solving real environmental problems. Hence the more righteous the political party, the larger the saving demanded. So we have 3,000 gegalitres (six Sydney Harbour equivalents) pledged by the Greens, 1,500 from Labor, and a puny one Sydney Harbour equivalent (500 gegalitres) from the Coalition.

Might the national dialogue on important water issues improve after the election? Could we ever have informed discussion about the global dilemma of how to best feed people while also protecting wild rivers, including those in northern Australia?

What if Labor wins the election? Prime Minister Mark Latham could ask Environment Minister Peter Garrett, 'What exactly is the water problem in Australia?' He is likely to again reply, 'There is simply not enough.' After consulting water expert Professor Peter Cullen, Asa Wahlquist could report the solution in *The Australian* newspaper the very next day: 'Let us start importing all our cheeses'.

The government may, or may not, change at the upcoming Federal election, but the media, the scientists and the politicians are likely to remain largely compliant. They all now feed off environmentalism at the expense of rational discussion, humanity and the environment. The size of the feast, however, is likely to be much greater under Labor.

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