



Australian Citizens Party

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MEDIA RELEASE

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Nationals finally react to Murray-Darling Basin pain

This release was first published as an article by Citizens Party researcher Jeremy Beck in the 30 June 2021 Australian Alert Service.

The Murray-Darling Basin Plan has inflicted years of pain, denying agricultural regions much-needed water at a reasonable price. An angry rural base whose livelihoods have been destroyed cannot be ignored politically any longer. It's therefore lawful that the Nationals finally reacted in parliament last week with moves to stop the most aggressive aspects of the Basin Plan. This effort to ensure that farmers and irrigators will not be stripped of further access to water adds pressure to the bungling Morrison Government. Better late than never, but it must be remembered, firstly, that the Basin Plan is a product of the Howard government's *Water Act 2007* which had the full support of National Party MPs at the time. And secondly, any genuine solution for the Murray-Darling Basin must include major water infrastructure projects. Token new "offset projects" alone won't cut it!

On 21 June Labor Party Senator Deborah O'Neill put up a motion to support "the delivery of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, in full and on time". Liberal Party MPs voted with the ALP to support this motion. But all National Party and One Nation senators voted against it. It is very significant that the Nationals broke ranks from their coalition government partners in the Liberal Party to vote with One Nation. "The farming community has been decimated by what has been taken so far. Enough is enough", said One Nation Senator Malcolm Roberts, in addressing Senator O'Neill's motion.

The Coalition/Labor bipartisanship for the Basin Plan goes back to former Goldman Sachs boss Malcolm Turnbull, who as Minister for the Environment and Water Resources in the Howard Government, was the architect of the *Water Act 2007*. This act established the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) through the Murray-Darling Basin Commission (MDBC), and the much-despised Basin Plan. At the time Turnbull designed the *Water Act*, his friends at Goldman Sachs were leading a global charge of investment banks into water speculation, declaring water to be "the petroleum for the next century". It's no coincidence that Turnbull was so keen for greater "environmental water" which creates artificial water shortages, and therefore, inflated water prices.

On 23 June, Senator Bridget McKenzie (on behalf of the Nationals) moved amendments to the [Water Legislation Amendment \(Inspector-General of Water Compliance and Other Measures\) Bill 2021](#). The bill provided powers to address water theft by irrigators, but Senator McKenzie put forward four key amendments to the [Water Act 2007](#) and the [Basin Plan 2012](#).

First, the Nationals called to end the controversial 450-gigalitre (GL) addition to the Basin Plan which the Gillard Government added as a sweetener for South Australia. Under current plans, potentially all the additional 450 GL would flush out to sea. "There is more to the environmental health of our river system than just pushing more fresh water downstream; science is telling us the Lower Lakes in South Australia need a significant re-think", Nationals Member for Nicholls, Damian Drum, said.

Second, the Nationals proposed to legislate an end of water buybacks. "Buybacks have devastated farming towns with less water available to grow food, increased water prices and stranded irrigation assets—this cannot be allowed to continue", stated Senator McKenzie's [23 June media release](#).

Third, the Nationals proposed to amend legislation for the [Sustainable Diversion Limit Adjustment Mechanism \(SDLAM\)](#) which would allow more "offset projects". The Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) states that these supply, constraint, and efficiency projects "allow Basin Plan environmental outcomes to be achieved with less water". While some of these projects may be useful, they provide a token contribution compared with the vision Australia had in building the Snowy Mountains Scheme.

Finally, the Nationals proposed that no further water be taken when the Basin Plan concludes in 2024. This would ensure that no recommendation could be put forward in the Basin Plan review requiring additional water for the environment.

The MDBA estimates that the contracted surface water recovery in the Murray-Darling Basin, as at 31 March 2021, is 2,106.4 GL per year. That's a massive amount of water withdrawn from agriculture. Prior to the Basin Plan, an average of 13,680 GL of surface water was used for agriculture, which was 42 per cent of the total water inflows in the Basin. Therefore, 58 per cent of total surface water in the Basin was untouched. Now additional "environmental flows" often cause riverbank erosion, and

seeing so much water flush out to sea makes little sense given South Australia's lower lakes were naturally saline before the completion of the Goolwa Barrages in 1940.

A real Murray-Darling Basin solution requires the following measures:

- Repeal Malcolm Turnbull's *Water Act 2007*, which initiated the Basin Plan.
- End speculation on water prices immediately. Prohibit water trading for anyone not owning farming land, as was the case prior to 1 July 2014, when only entitlement owners could buy and sell water allocations.
- Open SA's Lake Alexandrina to the ocean by removing the Goolwa Barrages. Around 900 GL of water per year needlessly evaporates from Lake Alexandrina and the adjacent Lake Albert.
- Build the Clarence River Scheme, which will add around 1,000 GL/year of water to the Murray-Darling Basin, generate hydroelectricity and provide flood mitigation for Grafton.
- Upgrade Lake Burrinjuck on the Murrumbidgee River from its present 1,028-GL capacity to 4,000 GL, which would create a reservoir eight times the size of Sydney Harbour.

The above plan should be funded by a government-run national bank. This will ensure nation-building for the common good, as opposed to water-trading bankers today who were architects of the disastrous Basin Plan in the first place.