

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
Wednesday, 20 February 2008  
CHAMBER

**Dr STONE** (Murray) (10.43 am)—I join in congratulating the new member for Moreton on his maiden speech. The then Leader of the Opposition, now Prime Minister, Mr Rudd, announced in his budget-in-reply speech last year that he would provide the then Prime Minister, John Howard, with bipartisan support to build a national consensus around our historic Murray-Darling Basin initiative. This initiative, of course, aimed at overcoming the century of fractured management of the basin, which is divided between jurisdictions—four states, the ACT and the Commonwealth. Successive state as well as federal Labor governments have never tackled the longstanding problems of the Murray-Darling Basin—water overallocation, ecological and governance problems. This city-centric, union dominated Labor government is probably still unfamiliar with the concept of total catchment management—a hot topic in the 1970s—but what is Minister Wong’s excuse for her continuing failure to bring all of the Labor state governments to the table so that they can begin to manage this huge, interdependent and stressed ecosystem, the Murray-Darling Basin? It must be managed as a whole, and urgently.

I acknowledge that the Minister for Climate Change and Water, Senator Wong, is trying very hard to bring the Victorian Labor government kicking and screaming to sign up with their fellow states to the National Water Initiative intergovernmental agreement. Mr Brumby, the Premier of Victoria, was recently quoted as saying: ‘Victoria has long held the position that the Murray-Darling system requires a national approach.’ So what side deal is the Premier, Mr Brumby, demanding in return for Victoria’s sign-on? What is the delay? We need this better governance and better management of the Murray-Darling Basin to commence urgently. The system is under great stress. Unfortunately, all the indications are that the sign-on by Victoria may be at the expense of the rural water users of northern Victoria. I have this concern because the Premier of Victoria, like his predecessor, Mr Bracks, has been caught short without a non-climate dependent sustainable plan for his capital city’s future water supply. The same problem applies to a number of other regional Victorian cities such as Bendigo, Ballarat and Geelong. There has been scant attention paid to urban recycling, stormwater harvesting or pricing mechanisms to ensure these urban water users are drought proofed. Victoria now has fixed terms for their parliament, so the clock is ticking to the time when city voters visit their water restriction frustrations on their Premier and his party. But the Victorian government has hit on a plan. It is technologically simple and can be delivered before their next election in 2009. Unfortunately, the plan does not deliver any short- or long-term water

security to Melbourne, Geelong, Ballarat and Bendigo, it is environmentally damaging and it does not represent value for money. It removes the future water security from the northern Victorian food bowl producers, who are dependent on the tributaries to the Murray. The plan is to pipe water south, out of the stressed Murray-Darling Basin, up over the Great Dividing Range, to Melbourne, Geelong and Ballarat and, on the way, to fill the ornamental lakes and water the gardens of Bendigo. One pipeline is already built to Bendigo and, as we speak, it is forcing water out of the neareempty Eildon Dam into the muddy wastes of Eppalock. This pipeline is discharging this water because they want to make sure they beat the rush as irrigators try to do a last autumn watering to save their failing crops and dying livestock. In northern Victoria they have been in drought for the last seven years. The uncertainty and stress caused by these pipeline plans has had, as you can imagine, a terrible impact on northern Victorian irrigators, stock and domestic supply users, and the communities who depend on their enterprise. Primary producers are literally selling their remaining water rights and walking off farms because the Victorian government has shown it has no interest in the viability of their farm business or their communities’ survival. Up to 30 per cent of water rights have been sold out of some districts, threatening the viability of the water supply system itself, an irrigation system some 100 years old. The Prime Minister, Mr Rudd, then Leader of the Opposition, made one fleeting reference to the problem of drought and the catastrophic impacts of the loss of water security for regions in his May address-in-reply budget speech. There has been scarcely anything more announced then or since. In his speech in May 2007, Mr Rudd announced: We can improve water security for local communities. That is why we have committed to funding the goldfields super pipe for Bendigo and Ballarat ... So at that time the Prime Minister, Mr Rudd, was in perfect agreement with Premier Brumby of Victoria. The water restriction problems of the cities of Bendigo and Ballarat could be solved by taking water out of the food bowl of northern Victoria, which had been a multibillion dollar per year farm production sector. We need to know what Mr Rudd, the Prime Minister, and his ministers for the environment and water think now, given the dust has long settled on the hot political contest for the two extremely marginal seats of Bendigo and Ballarat. There was no environmental, social or economic evaluation of the impact of the so-called ‘goldfields super pipe’ pipelines before the projects were announced as a done deal by the Premier of Victoria—quite an extraordinary thing! So let us unpack this decision to pipe water out of one failing catchment, in the Murray-Darling Basin, to others with far better local water supply and recycling opportunities. Then I will

conclude my remarks by asking: why is the Rudd government continuing to support the still-to-be-built Ballarat pipeline and will it ensure the use of the Commonwealth EPBC Act does not become a mockery as the Melbourne to Geelong pipeline is put on the table for urgent construction before the next Victorian election? The so-called 'goldfields super pipe' takes water from the Goulburn River within the Murray-Darling Basin in Victoria up over the central highlands to the city of Ballarat. Ballarat enjoys a natural rainfall double the volume of that of northern Victoria—which is to supply this water. Ballarat is also close by one of the biggest good-quality groundwater systems in western Victoria—the Otways. Ballarat has virtually no recycling of water for domestic or industry consumption. The amount of coal produced energy required to push the water over the divide from the droughted farmers and the stricken northern Victorian environment is simply obscene. No-one who claims they care about carbon emissions and climate change would contemplate such a project on the basis of climate change impacts alone.

Along the way, this so-called 'goldfields super pipe' also supplies Bendigo and its surrounding communities. This is another population which has been failed by successive Victorian Labor governments, who have ignored their impending water supply crisis. Bendigo has, like Ballarat, next to no water recycling. Its 100-year-old stock and domestic system leaks more water than it delivers and as much as the city of Bendigo needs annually. But the state owned Coliban Water supply authority says it cannot afford to pipe the stock and domestic system for at least another 15 years because the state government will not give it the money. How has the Victorian government managed to placate the concerns of the future water recipients—the people at the end of the pipe, the toilet flushers and the car washers of Melbourne, Ballarat and Geelong? These people are aware of the extreme stress in the Murray-Darling Basin system and the extreme pressure on the tributaries of the Murray, particularly the Goulburn, Broken, Campaspe, Loddon and Avoca rivers.

The people in Melbourne, Geelong and Ballarat know that we have had seven years of the worst drought on record. They know about the human impact of the drought and they are aware of the dying red gums and the depleted Ramsar listed wetlands in the Balmah Forest, the world's biggest red gum forest. I believe Melbourne, Geelong and Ballarat people know and care about these problems and issues.

But how have they been placated so that they are not marching in the streets beside the northern Victorians, who regularly march in the streets saying to the Premier of Victoria, 'Enough is enough'? The people have been placated through the Premier saying, 'This is not a problem because we are going to fund the food bowl modernisation project.' The Victorian government has acknowledged that this requires \$2.5 billion of funds to

be invested into their own state owned Goulburn-Murray water supply system. This \$2.5 billion, it says, will help save the water which currently leaks, seeps and evaporates out of their century-old irrigation supply system. It also acknowledges that there are a lot of on-farm water-saving works that could be done if farmers could afford to do them—given they have been in seven years of drought and are at the end of their economic, emotional and psychological resources to do the water-saving measures that are now needed. The state government said, 'We acknowledge \$2.5 billion is needed to invest in our own state owned water supply system. We'll give northern Victoria \$600 million, not \$2.5 billion. We'll get another \$400 million out of Melbourne water users and northern Victoria water users, and we'll do some works on our supply system in northern Victoria, and whatever savings of water we get out of those works we'll give a third to irrigators, a third to the environment and take the other third to Melbourne.' That sounds like, perhaps, a reasonable proposition, maybe even a good deal; but look at the detail and what the experts say about the volume of water that can be saved with \$600 million plus \$400 million worth of infrastructure investment. That investment is mostly being put into new meters—I never did see a new meter save water—and into things like total channel control.

When we question if those water savings are really there—particularly in the dry, drought years which we are assured will be even more likely with climate change—to ensure that at least 75 gigalitres goes to Melbourne and Geelong each year, the Victorian government says, 'Yes, that is a problem, isn't it? We've got an even better short-term solution. We will take the environmental reserve out of Eildon Dam to supply Melbourne's toilets, car washing and leaf flushing because Melbourne urban water users can't be left water short.' This environmental reserve in the Goulburn system in the Eildon Dam is about 30 gigalitres of water. It is of the highest security of all. Irrigators cannot use it. It is a volume of water reserved in Eildon Dam to use for flushing the Goulburn River should there be a toxic blue-green algae outbreak. These blue-green algae outbreaks occur in hot weather when the water is shallow—the conditions that exist now. When toxic blue-green algae outbreaks occur, the ecosystem is quickly poisoned and there can be no human consumption of the water. That is why that environmental reserve is there in Eildon Dam. But Mr Brumby has said: 'That's okay, we will take it and pipe it to Melbourne. We acknowledge the savings we talk about by our investment in the water supply system won't be there, particularly in dry years, but we cannot leave Melbourne short of water.' I say to the Victorian government that you have shamefully neglected Melbourne's sustainable water resource during your time in government. Melbourne does not have recycling in any way, shape or form as it should. Stormwater harvesting

is virtually nonexistent and the dumping of all treated sewage water out at Gunnamatta is a disgrace. Melbourne water users are profligate in their use. The water-pricing mechanisms for Melbourne water consumption in no way reflects the cost and value of the water and the need to conserve it.

Instead of tackling these sorts of issues and finding solutions to Melbourne's long-term water supply, we have this quick and dirty and technologically simple fix of taking water from the Murray-Darling Basin over the divide in the north of the state of Victoria to the urban water users of Bendigo, Geelong, Ballarat and Melbourne. Those members in this chamber will not be surprised to know that environmental, social and economic assessments or the impacts of the Melbourne, Geelong, Ballarat or Bendigo pipelines were never done. There were no environment assessments undertaken before these pipelines were announced as a done deal. You might say that that is extraordinary. How could that be in the 21st century with a democratically elected government? The Bendigo pipeline is already completed and it is pushing water out of the near depleted Eildon Dam into the muddy waste of the Eppalock Dam. The Bendigo pipeline is in place, the Ballarat pipeline is yet to come and the Melbourne pipeline is on its way, we are assured.

I want to commend the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts, Mr Garrett, in saying:

'Hang on, this is just too embarrassing. Enough is enough. We will now declare the Goulburn system to Melbourne north-south pipeline a controlled action under the Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act.' Mr Garrett has realised you just cannot keep going on like this and get away with it, even though you ignore the farmers marching in the streets, because the metro media do not print their problems, and even though you consistently say, 'This is not a problem because we will find water savings somehow.' Mr Garrett has said, 'This north-south pipeline, the Goulburn system to Melbourne and Geelong, is a controlled action,' under the EPBC Act. He declared this about the middle of last week. I congratulate him for doing that. He got into an enough strife with the dredging of the bay and he is in a bit of bother with the desalination plant. But I am pleased he made this announcement about the north-south pipeline. However, I am shocked to see, just five working days after Mr Garrett's announcement, that we already have the report. Here it is: the 'Sugarloaf pipeline project'. You might wonder why this Melbourne-Goulburn Valley, north-south pipeline, is now called the Sugarloaf project. It was an attempt to hide it from the public, but we discovered in time that this project is now called Sugarloaf, after one of the reservoirs on the way. Just a few working days after the declaration of this pipeline project as a controlled action, we have the Victorian government's project impact assessment report.

I have to tell you, I am shocked and ashamed. This

report is thin. It regularly says: 'Well, of course, we're going to have to do more work assessing here and assessing there. Yes, there are scores of endangered and vulnerable flora and fauna, as listed in the EPBC Act, that will be in the way of the pipeline. But we believe we can put in some mitigating measures. Perhaps we can put the pipeline overland here rather than under there. The job will be right. Don't you worry about that.' That is what this Sugarloaf pipeline project report basically says.

It does not go into the impacts of the loss of the water from the Murray-Darling Basin in northern Victoria and the impacts on the flora and fauna across the riverine tracts of the Broken, Goulburn and Murray rivers. It does not talk about the impacts of taking the environmental reserve out of Eildon Dam. Without this reserve we will have nothing to fight the toxic bluegreen algal blooms, which, as we speak, are a threat in the Murray. This pipeline project document at last says: 'Oh, dear, yes, there are some Indigenous heritage issues. Hmm. We'll think about those,' though it does not identify them in detail and says, 'We need to do a bit more work there too.'

We are supposed to accept this project impact assessment five working days after its declaration as a controlled action as the answer to removing what last year would have been 30 per cent of the northern Victoria irrigation region's water supply to flush down the toilets of Melbourne. Why doesn't the Premier really take a statesmanlike approach here and say: 'This doesn't drought proof Melbourne. This was a quick and dirty political fix. We were panicked by Melbourne, Geelong, Ballarat and Bendigo people not being able to water their roses. We didn't really care about the food bowl future of northern Victoria—that multibillion dollar industry and income generator. We thought we could get away with it by throwing \$600 million at them rather than fixing up our own state owned water infrastructure'? I am calling on the minister, Mr Garrett, to ensure they do better. *(Time expired)*

**Murray Electorate: Water**

**Dr STONE** (Murray) (7.58 pm)—The north-south pipeline is planned to take 75 gigalitres of water annually out of the Goulburn Valley across the Great Dividing Range to Melbourne. I want to know why the Victorian government has defied the ruling of the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts, Mr Garrett, on this. Despite the announcement that, under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999, it is a controlled action, the Victorian Minister for Planning has announced that an environmental effects statement is not required and that instead he will simply produce a project impact assessment report. I want to know why the EES is not to happen. I want to know what the minister in this House, the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts, Mr Garrett, is going to do about the Victorian planning minister's refusal to supply an EES. I hope that he will take notice of the extreme circumstances that are now confronting people who are seeing this water being taken away. I also want him to make sure that he has read very carefully the flora and fauna impacts, which have already been documented quite comprehensively, given that this pipeline is to not only go through pristine forest but also take the environmental flow out of Eildon Dam—flow which is supposed to help prevent blue-green algal blooms.