

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, MR E.G. WHITLAM, Q.C., M.P.,
TO THE MURRAY VALLEY DEVELOPMENT LEAGUE MEETING
PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA, TUESDAY 22 OCTOBER 1974

THANK YOU COUNCILLOR GEMMELL AND THANK YOU
REPRESENTATIVES OF THE MURRAY VALLEY DEVELOPMENT LEAGUE FOR
ARRANGING THIS CONFERENCE TONIGHT ON A MATTER WHICH IS OF
CONCERN TO ALL OF US PRESENT.

THE MURRAY VALLEY DEVELOPMENT LEAGUE SINCE ITS
FORMATION IN 1944 HAS PROMOTED THE CONCEPT OF THE
ESTABLISHMENT OF AN INTER-STATE BODY TO COORDINATE THE
BALANCED DEVELOPMENT OF THE RIVER MURRAY AREAS. I UNDERSTAND
THAT MR VERN LAWRENCE, THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE LEAGUE,
IN HIS THEN CAPACITY AS ORGANISING SECRETARY, WAS ASSOCIATED
WITH THE 1946 MURRAY VALLEY RESOURCES SURVEY COMMITTEE.
ESTABLISHED BY THE CHIFLEY LABOR GOVERNMENT AND THE
GOVERNMENTS OF NEW SOUTH WALES, VICTORIA AND SOUTH AUSTRALIA.
THE LEAGUE HAS ALWAYS BEEN CONCERNED WITH THE QUALITY OF THE
WATERS OF THE RIVER MURRAY AND ITS TRIBUTARIES AND IT IS
LEAGUE POLICY THAT THE RIVER MURRAY COMMISSION SHOULD BE
RESPONSIBLE FOR WATER QUALITY.

THE RIVER MURRAY COMMISSION WAS, AS YOU ARE ALL AWARE, FORMED NEARLY 60 YEARS AGO WHEN THE RIVER MURRAY WATERS AGREEMENT WAS MADE. THE AGREEMENT WAS, AS NOTED BY DR CLARK IN HIS MOST VALUABLE PAPER ON THE ADMINISTRATION OF INTERSTATE RIVERS, "A PIONEERING AGREEMENT, NOT JUST FOR AUSTRALIA, BUT FOR OTHER FEDERAL SYSTEMS IN THE COMMON LAW WORLD". THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT COULD NOT HAVE SIGNED THE RIVER MURRAY WATERS AGREEMENT IN 1914 AND THE AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENT COULD NOT HAVE PASSED THE RIVER MURRAY WATERS ACT IN 1915 BUT FOR THE FACT THAT THE RIVER WAS STILL BEING USED AT THAT TIME FOR INTER-STATE NAVIGATION, A MATTER ON WHICH THE AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENT CAN MAKE LAWS.

THE ORIGINAL AGREEMENT AND ACT ENTAILED A SMALLER EXPENDITURE BY THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT THAN BY EACH OF THE STATE GOVERNMENTS. THE LEGISLATION WAS CONCERNED WITH STORAGE OF THE RIVER'S WATERS AND LOCKS AND WEIRS FOR NAVIGATION OF THE RIVER.

NOWADAYS THERE IS VIRTUALLY NO INTERSTATE NAVIGATION ON THE MURRAY. ACCORDINGLY, THE AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENT NOW HAS VERY TENUOUS, IF ANY, CONSTITUTIONAL POWERS TO PASS LAWS WITH RESPECT TO THE MURRAY. IN PARTICULAR, IT CANNOT BY ITSELF PASS LAWS CONCERNING THE QUALITY OF THE WATERS AND THE USE OF THE RIPARIAN LANDS.

THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT AGREES ENTIRELY WITH THE VIEW PUT FORWARD BY THE LEAGUE THAT THE RIVER MURRAY COMMISSION SHOULD BE GIVEN RESPONSIBILITIES FOR WATER QUALITY IN THE RIVER MURRAY. I WOULD GO EVEN FURTHER AND SAY THAT THERE IS A NEED FOR AN INTER-STATE BODY TO CO-ORDINATE ALL ASPECTS OF WATER USE AND MANAGEMENT AND TO TENDER ADVICE TO GOVERNMENTS ON THE USE AND MANAGEMENT OF RELATED LANDS.

THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT IS ALSO AWARE OF THE CONCERN ON THIS QUESTION THAT HAS BEEN EXPRESSED BY A WIDE RANGE OF ORGANISATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS, INCLUDING SOME OF THE HONOURABLE MEMBERS OF BOTH MAJOR PARTIES PRESENT HERE TONIGHT.

IT WAS THE SAME SORT OF CONCERN THAT THE PREMIER OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA, MR DUNSTAN, CONVEYED TO ME IN HIS LETTER ON 19 JANUARY 1973. IN RESPONSE TO THIS LETTER I CONVENED A MEETING BETWEEN MYSELF AND THE PREMIERS OF NEW SOUTH WALES, VICTORIA AND SOUTH AUSTRALIA ON 2 MARCH 1973 TO DISCUSS THE RIVER MURRAY AND THE POWERS OF THE RIVER MURRAY COMMISSION. AT THAT MEETING, ALL PREMIERS EXPRESSED CONCERN OVER PRESENT AND POTENTIAL WATER QUALITY PROBLEMS IN THE RIVER AND ALL SAID THAT THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE COMMISSION SHOULD BE INCREASED TO COPE WITH THESE PROBLEMS. WE AGREED AT THE MEETING TO ESTABLISH A STEERING COMMITTEE OF MINISTERS OF THE FOUR GOVERNMENTS TO WHICH A WORKING PARTY OF OFFICERS IS TO REPORT ON THESE MATTERS.

IN RETROSPECT I BELIEVE THE WORKING PARTY SHOULD HAVE BEEN GIVEN A DEFINITE COMPLETION DATE; EIGHTEEN MONTHS AFTERWARDS THE WORKING PARTY APPEARS TO HAVE ACHIEVED LITTLE.

I UNDERSTAND THE WORKING PARTY HAS ESTABLISHED EXPERT COMMITTEES ON SALINITY, WATER QUALITY, IMPROVED IRRIGATION PRACTICES AND BIOLOGICAL CONSERVATION. LAST YEAR THE WORKING PARTY SUBMITTED AN INTERIM REPORT TO MINISTERS, WHICH THEY ENDORSED AND WHICH MADE A NUMBER OF RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING MINOR SALT MITIGATION WORK.

I UNDERSTAND THAT THE WORKING PARTY'S COMMITTEE DEALING WITH WATER QUALITY IS LIKELY TO SUBMIT A REPORT BEFORE THE END OF THE YEAR RECOMMENDING A WATER QUALITY MONITORING NETWORK FOR THE MURRAY AND COMMENTING ON THE NEED FOR NEW ADMINISTRATIVE ARRANGEMENTS TO CONTROL WATER QUALITY.

THE WORKING PARTY HAS ADOPTED THE POSITION THAT IT CANNOT MAKE DEFINITE RECOMMENDATIONS ON HOW THE FUNCTIONS OF THE RIVER MURRAY COMMISSION SHOULD BE MODIFIED UNTIL IT HAS IDENTIFIED THE EXTENT OF THE PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH THE MURRAY RIVER AND THEIR ROOT CAUSES. I CERTAINLY DO NOT ARGUE WITH THE LOGIC OF THIS POSITION; IT IS HOWEVER MY STRONGLY HELD VIEW THAT THERE IS ALREADY MORE THAN ENOUGH EVIDENCE TO DEMONSTRATE THAT THE CURRENT POWERS AND FUNCTIONS OF THE RMC IN ASSOCIATION WITH STATE GOVERNMENT POWERS HAVE PROVED TO BE INADEQUATE. THIS EVIDENCE IS AVAILABLE BOTH IN TERMS OF TECHNICAL DATA AND IN ALMOST UNANIMOUS EXPRESSIONS OF CONCERN BY THE PEOPLE MOST INTIMATELY CONNECTED WITH THE RIVER SUCH AS YOURSELVES.

I AM DEEPLY CONCERNED THAT A MATTER IN NEED OF REFORM IDENTIFIED 18 MONTHS AGO BY MYSELF AND THE PREMIERS IS TAKING SO LONG TO BE EXAMINED.

THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT IS FIRMLY CONVINCED THAT THE WORKING PARTY SHOULD, IN PARALLEL WITH ITS TECHNICAL INVESTIGATIONS, BE LOOKING AT THE MOST GENERAL CLAUSES OF ITS TERMS OF REFERENCE, REQUIRING IT TO EXAMINE THE TYPES OF MEASURES WHICH NEED TO BE TAKEN TO PROTECT AND IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF THE RIVER MURRAY WATERS AND THE CHANGES WHICH WOULD BE REQUIRED IN THE RIVER MURRAY WATERS AGREEMENT TO ENABLE THE RIVER MURRAY COMMISSION TO UNDERTAKE SUCH MEASURES. IN SUMMARY, THE WORKING PARTY SHOULD BE CONSIDERING NOT WHETHER CHANGES SHOULD BE MADE IN THE RIVER MURRAY WATERS AGREEMENT, BUT WHAT CHANGES.

THE REALITY OF THE SITUATION IS THAT SALINITY IN THE MURRAY IS ONE OF AUSTRALIA'S MOST SERIOUS WATER POLLUTION PROBLEMS.

A GREAT DEAL OF MONEY IS TO BE SPENT IN TREATING ADELAIDE'S WATER SUPPLY, BUT IT MAY SURPRISE MANY PEOPLE TO LEARN THAT WHILE THIS WILL PROVIDE SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN MANY RESPECTS TO THE QUALITY OF ADELAIDE'S WATER IT WILL HAVE NO EFFECT WHATEVER ON THE SALINITY OF THE WATER BEING USED BY THE RESIDENTS OF THAT CITY. THIS MOST INTRACTABLE PROBLEM MUST THEREFORE BE DEALT WITH EITHER BY DIVERSION OF SALINE WATERS FROM THE MURRAY RIVER, OR BY CHANGES IN LAND USE AND IRRIGATION PRACTICES.

CONFLICTS OVER USE OF WATER IN THE REGION ARE GOING TO INCREASE AS THE YEARS GO ON. AT THE PROJECTED RATE OF INCREASE IN DEMAND, SOUTH AUSTRALIA'S POST - DARTMOUTH ENTITLEMENT WILL BE FULLY TAKEN UP BY THE YEAR 2000.

TO DATE NO ONE HAS MADE A COMPREHENSIVE, INTEGRATED EXAMINATION OF THE IMPLICATIONS WHICH DIFFERENT LAND USE PATTERNS HAVE FOR WATER RESOURCES IN THE VALLEY. TWO OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT USES WHICH SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN SUCH AN EXAMINATION ARE, OF COURSE, IRRIGATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF URBAN GROWTH CENTRES SUCH AS ALBURY-WODONGA. SUCH AN EXAMINATION MIGHT INDICATE THAT CHANGES IN EXISTING OR PLANNED LAND USE ARE DESIRABLE IN ORDER TO PROTECT THE QUALITY OF THE WATERS OF THE MURRAY SO THAT MAXIMUM BENEFICIAL USE OF THE WATERS IN ECONOMIC, ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL TERMS CAN BE OBTAINED FOR BOTH THE REGION AND THE NATION AS A WHOLE.

THIS MATTER HAS NOT BEEN INVESTIGATED BY THE WORKING PARTY. DR CASS PUT IT TO THE MINISTERIAL STEERING COMMITTEE LAST YEAR BUT THE STATE MINISTERS REJECTED THE PROPOSAL.

THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT IS PROVIDING LARGE AMOUNTS OF FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ALBURY-WODONGA AND MONARTO GROWTH CENTRES.

IT IS IMPERATIVE OF COURSE THAT THESE DEVELOPMENTS DO NOT ADVERSELY AFFECT THE QUALITY OF THE WATERS OF THE RIVER MURRAY. I AM THEREFORE PLEASED THAT THE CITIES COMMISSION HAS BEEN SUPERVISING WHAT MUST BE ONE OF THE MOST COMPREHENSIVE WATER QUALITY STUDIES EVER UNDERTAKEN IN AUSTRALIA IN RELATION TO THE ALBURY-WODONGA GROWTH CENTRE. THE REPORT OF THIS STUDY WILL BE AVAILABLE LATER THIS YEAR AND I AM CONFIDENT THAT IT WILL ENSURE THAT TREATMENT SYSTEMS WILL BE SO IMPLEMENTED THAT ALBURY-WODONGA WILL NOT HAVE SIGNIFICANT ADVERSE EFFECTS ON WATER QUALITY IN THE RIVER MURRAY. WHEN I MET WITH THE PREMIERS OF NEW SOUTH WALES AND VICTORIA ON 25 JANUARY 1973 IN ALBURY-WODONGA WE SAID THAT SERVICES WILL BE PROVIDED TO THE HIGHEST POSSIBLE STANDARD TO PROTECT THE INTERESTS OF OTHER USERS OF THE RIVER MURRAY; THIS STATEMENT I STILL STAND BY.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF OTHER FORMS OF LAND USE HAVE NOT BEEN EVALUATED IN COMPARABLE DEPTH AND I SAY AGAIN THAT AN OVERALL EXAMINATION OF LAND USE IN THE MURRAY REGION IS ESSENTIAL. OUR POSITION IN RELATION TO MANAGEMENT OF THE RIVER MURRAY IS CLEAR: THE RIVER MURRAY COMMISSION SHOULD HAVE THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR CONTROL OF WATER QUALITY IN THE RIVER MURRAY. FURTHER I BELIEVE THAT THE RIVER MURRAY COMMISSION SHOULD HAVE CERTAIN RESPONSIBILITIES IN RELATION TO ALL ASPECTS OF THE USE AND MANAGEMENT OF THE WATERS OF THE RIVER MURRAY AND ITS RELATED LANDS.

IN A COMPLEX SYSTEM SUCH AS THE RIVER MURRAY VALLEY WITH ITS VARIOUS INTER-RELATIONSHIPS IT IS SURELY SELF-EVIDENT THAT THERE NEEDS TO BE A BODY TO CO-ORDINATE THE PLANNING OF THESE VARIOUS ASPECTS. BECAUSE THE RIVER RUNS THROUGH THREE STATES, AN INTERSTATE AGENCY SUCH AS AN EXPANDED RIVER MURRAY COMMISSION IS CLEARLY REQUIRED. THIS CONCEPT OF AN INTER-STATE BODY MANAGING WATER RESOURCES ON A RIVER BASIN BASIS WOULD ACCORD WITH WORLDWIDE TRENDS IN THIS DIRECTION EXEMPLIFIED BY THE DELAWARE AND SUSQUEHANNA RIVER BASIN COMPACTS IN THE UNITED STATES, NEGOTIATED BY THE STATE AND FEDERAL GOVERNMENTS, AND THE RECENT ESTABLISHMENT OF REGIONAL WATER AUTHORITIES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM.

THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT WOULD SEE SUCH A BODY PRINCIPALLY PLAYING A CO-ORDINATING ROLE, MUCH OF ITS FUNCTION BEING OF AN ADVISORY OR DELIBERATIVE NATURE ONLY. THE ORGANISATION MIGHT NEED SOME STRONG "LAST RESORT POWERS" TO ENSURE ITS EFFECTIVENESS. HOWEVER, EXPERIENCE IN THE UNITED STATES INDICATES THAT THESE ARE RARELY USED, IF AT ALL. WE WOULD ALSO SEE SUCH A BODY HAVING A DEFINITE OBLIGATION TO CONSULT WITH SUCH GROUPS AS THE MURRAY VALLEY DEVELOPMENT LEAGUE.

I AM SURE THAT ONE OF THE REASONS FOR LACK OF INTEREST IN THIS BROADER APPROACH TO THE USE AND MANAGEMENT OF THE RIVER MURRAY IS DUE TO A FEAR THAT SOME OF THE STATE POWERS MAY BE FORFEITED TO THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT, WHILE STATE GOVERNMENTS COULD LOSE SOME OF THEIR RIGHT TO INDIVIDUAL ACTION, I EMPHASISE THAT THESE RIGHTS WOULD BE VESTED IN AN INTER-STATE BODY ACTING IN THE BEST INTERESTS OF ALL CONCERNED. AS PUT SO WELL BY DR CASS RECENTLY, THIS IS A CASE WHERE STATES' RIGHTS ARE NONSENSE; IT IS PEOPLES' RIGHTS WHICH ARE IMPORTANT AND THAT MEANS ALL THE PEOPLE DEPENDENT ON THE RIVER AND ITS RELATED LANDS IN ALL THREE STATES.

THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT CAN DO LITTLE IN THE WAY OF DIRECT ACTION IN THIS AREA; CONSENSUS IS THE ONLY WAY OF ACHIEVING ANYTHING. I BELIEVE THAT WE HAVE MADE SUGGESTIONS TO STATE GOVERNMENTS ALONG THE LINES OF WHAT IS DESIRED BY THE PEOPLE OF THE MURRAY VALLEY. WE SHALL CONTINUE TO PUT PROPOSALS BUT WE CAN DO LITTLE MORE. I URGE THE FEDERAL MEMBERS HERE TONIGHT, WHATEVER THEIR POLITICAL PERSUASIONS, TO TAKE THIS MATTER UP WITH THEIR STATE COLLEAGUES WITH A VIEW TO CONVEYING A GREATER SENSE OF URGENCY AND PRIORITY.

I HAVE SAID THAT I AM CONCERNED WITH THE LACK OF PROGRESS OF THE WORKING PARTY. IF IN MARCH 1975 - WHICH WILL BE TWO YEARS AFTER MY MEETING WITH THE THREE PREMIERS - PROGRESS HAS BEEN UNSATISFACTORY, THEN I SHALL CALL FOR A FURTHER MEETING WITH STATE PREMIERS IN ORDER TO OBTAIN

AGREEMENT ON AN ACCELERATED PROGRAM FOR COMPLETION OF THE WORKING PARTY'S INVESTIGATIONS. THIS IS ONE EXAMPLE OF DIRECT ACTION THAT I CAN TAKE.

THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT WOULD ALSO GIVE SERIOUS CONSIDERATION TO REQUESTS FOR FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE FROM STATE GOVERNMENTS FOR MEASURES TO ACHIEVE AND MAINTAIN SATISFACTORY WATER QUALITY, BE THEY FOR ENGINEERING WORKS OR FOR THE RESTRUCTURING OF LAND USE IN THE REGION. SUCH REQUESTS WOULD BE CONSIDERED IN THE CONTEXT OF THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT POLICY TOWARDS WATER RESOURCES MANAGEMENT. IN THIS CONTEXT I WOULD LIKE TO REPEAT A SPECIFIC OFFER MADE TO STATE MINISTERS BY DR CASS LAST YEAR WHICH WAS NOT TAKEN UP - THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT WILL PROVIDE FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE TOWARDS ANY STUDIES IN THE REGION WHICH IT CONSIDERS WOULD CONTRIBUTE SIGNIFICANTLY TO THE IMPROVED USE AND MANAGEMENT OF THE RIVER MURRAY WATERS AND RELATED LANDS. BECAUSE STATE GOVERNMENTS APPEAR TO BE CONCENTRATING ON ENGINEERING STUDIES, THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT WOULD PREFER TO FUND STUDIES BIASED TOWARDS THE SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES.

SIXTY YEARS HAVE PASSED SINCE THE SIGNING OF THE ORIGINAL RIVER MURRAY WATERS AGREEMENT AND I BELIEVE WE ARE AGAIN ABOUT TO ENTER A PERIOD OF CONFLICT OVER THE USES OF THE RIVER MURRAY WATERS, TOGETHER WITH INCREASING PRESSURES ON THE ENVIRONMENT. I DO NOT BELIEVE THE PRESENT RIVER MURRAY COMMISSION OR EXISTING STATE INSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL ARRANGEMENTS WILL BE ABLE TO COPE WITH THESE PROBLEMS AND I BELIEVE NEW ARRANGEMENTS ARE NECESSARY.

I URGE ALL PARTIES CONCERNED TO PROCEED AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE TO DEVELOP AN APPROACH TO THE MANAGEMENT OF THE RIVER MURRAY WHICH WILL ENSURE THAT THE WATERS ARE USED TO PROVIDE MAXIMUM REGIONAL AND NATIONAL BENEFITS IN SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL TERMS.
