



# **Amanda Rishworth MP**

## Member for Kingston

### **Water Amendment Bill 2008**

14 October 2008

I rise today to speak in favour of the Water Amendment Bill 2008. This is one of the most important pieces of legislation most of us are likely to see. This bill is particularly critical for my own state of South Australia. After years of inaction and neglect it is the Rudd Labor government that is putting this historic, landmark law into place. This bill provides the legislative framework for the unprecedented agreement reached at the Council of Australian Governments in July this year. The importance of this agreement cannot be overestimated as it marks many firsts for the Murray-Darling Basin. For the first time ever, this bill will ensure that the Murray-Darling Basin is managed in the national interest and not for sectional interests.

The Murray-Darling Basin is the most significant combination of water systems in Australia and includes three of the largest rivers in Australia—the River Murray, the Darling River and the Murrumbidgee River—and covers over one million square kilometres. Ten per cent of our nation's population live in the basin and millions of residents in the Adelaide metropolitan area rely on the Murray River for drinking water. In addition, the basin accounts for 40 per cent of the value of Australia's agricultural output. This data highlights the huge significance of this water system to our country. Considering the importance of the basin it is extremely disappointing that previous governments have failed to take the necessary steps to protect this vital river system.

As a representative of South Australia I know only too well the dire situation that is now facing the Murray-Darling system. As the state at the end of the line, we are now seeing the result of years of overallocation of water and inaction by previous governments. The crisis has been severely exacerbated by an acute drought and climate change. The dire state of the Murray-Darling system has many significant impacts for South Australia, including for our irrigators in the Riverland and elsewhere that rely on the Murray. This also goes for the communities of the Lower Lakes, Lake Albert and Lake Alexandrina, and the Coorong, which are at the end of the river. The impact is also pronounced for the city of Adelaide. Residents rely heavily on the River Murray for water for critical human needs. They rely on it for drinking water.

The bill before the parliament today and the agreement struck through the COAG process will for the first time in our history establish a single body which will have the responsibility for oversight of the Murray-Darling Basin. The new body will be called the Murray-Darling Basin Authority and will bring

the existing Murray-Darling Basin Commission and the Murray-Darling Basin Authority into one. This independent authority will be responsible for developing a basin-wide plan and will report to the Commonwealth minister for approval. The government has appointed Mr Robert Freeman as the first chief executive officer. He previously headed up the Department of Water, Land, Biodiversity and Conservation in my home state of South Australia and has extensive experience in handling the Murray-Darling Basin.

The new Murray-Darling Basin Authority will be charged with administering the basin in the national interest. One of its first tasks will be to set a scientifically based cap for the basin on how much water can be extracted from the system—both surface and groundwater. After 100 years of overallocation of water from the system this will be the first time that this has occurred—a move that finally recognises that the whole system is connected and does not start and end at state borders.

Of critical interest to South Australians is the part of the bill that enables the Basin Plan to provide arrangements to provide for critical human needs, protecting drinking water for communities along the river. Earlier in this debate the member for Riverina reminded us not to forget the people in this debate. There can be fewer greater calls on us as a community than to provide safe, clean and affordable drinking water for everyone, for all people in our communities. In the southern suburbs of Adelaide the most significant holding of drinking water is at the Happy Valley Reservoir, which has a capacity of 11,600 megalitres.

I recently visited the Happy Valley Reservoir with the Prime Minister and we talked to a number of people working there. These employees estimated that over the last year 90 per cent of the reservoir water has been extracted from the Murray River, illustrating the significant reliance that Adelaide has on the Murray during periods of extreme drought. Protecting the one million-plus people who rely on drinking water from the Murray River should be and is the government's priority. The previous government left Adelaide high and dry when they failed to implement a plan that addressed the important issue of an adequate supply of drinking water. However, securing Adelaide's drinking water is not the priority of the Liberal opposition, and the member for Murray in her press release dated 27 March criticised the Rudd government for making human critical needs a priority, saying:

There is further worry when Mr Rudd declared that human consumption of the Murray system water is to take precedence over all other water uses. Does this mean that when Adelaide squeaks, irrigation systems shudder?

This statement shows a reckless disregard for the city of Adelaide and other communities that rely on the Murray for drinking water.

The bill before us today and the funding associated with the changes are part of the Rudd government's wider water plan, Water for the Future, the \$12.9 billion plan to secure the water supply for all Australians. The Water for the Future plan addresses four key priority areas: taking action on climate change, using water wisely, securing water supplies and supporting healthy rivers. To help immediately, the Rudd Labor government, for the first time in

the nation's history, is spending \$3.1 billion to purchase water entitlements from willing sellers, returning water to the system and increasing environmental flows, giving our rivers a greater share now and when it rains. At the beginning of this year, the Rudd Labor government moved swiftly to purchase \$15 million of water entitlements along the basin. We have heard some concern about this measure within this debate. However, there has been extremely strong support expressed for our government's decision to buy back water to help the Murray-Darling system. This was expressed at the many functions and forums I go to within my electorate and, most importantly, at the community cabinet which was held in my electorate at Hallett Cove.

Residents in my electorate also have welcomed the landmark announcement to assist the New South Wales government to purchase Toorale Station, including entitlements of up to 14 billion litres of water. The buying back of water entitlements will deliver significant boosts to environmental flows in the Darling River. The action taken by the Rudd government is in stark contrast to the divided and incoherent policy positions of the opposition when it comes to buying back water entitlements for the Murray-Darling Basin, and I think we have heard that in this debate.

The opposition, over the last few months, have had many positions when it comes to buying back water. Let us just have a quick look at some of these positions. Position 1 of the opposition was proposed by the member for Sturt on Adelaide radio. He suggested that the government should spend more money on buying back water. The second position was announced in a press release by the member for Calare, who stated that water buybacks were 'meaningless'. The member for Wide Bay, in a press release, advocated position 3, which was a scare tactic statement that shoppers would pay more if the government was to buy back water. Position 4 was advocated by the previous Leader of the Opposition, who went further than anyone in suggesting that we should compulsorily acquire water entitlements. Finally, the shadow minister for the environment suggested in a doorstep interview on 29 April, which I assume is position 5, that buybacks would not work.

These many positions show just how divided the Liberals are. It seems that there is one message coming from the opposition downstream and another from the opposition upstream. This haphazard approach from the opposition demonstrates exactly why this legislation is so necessary. This unseemly back and forth illustrates what has been wrong with the previous system. Every group, every state, every landholder and every community has their own interests at stake and, naturally, they would like to see their interests protected. But that has meant that things have not been happening in the national interest. The overall interests of the basin have not been paramount. We need to move beyond this approach of everyone looking out for their own interests at the expense of the long-term health and vitality of the river system. That is why the Rudd Labor government is getting on with the job of increasing the amount of water in the system. While the opposition squabbles over whether they even support water buybacks, we are actually doing what is necessary—sitting down with other governments and sorting this out once and for all.

Those living along the River Murray system are suffering with the drought that is ravaging the area. However, it must be recognised that those communities at the end of the Murray-Darling system are doing it tough. Those communities around the Lower Lakes in South Australia have relied on the water in the lakes not only for irrigation but also for domestic use. The sites are, of course, also of immense environmental significance. The Rudd government has announced significant money to help these communities by providing \$120 million for an integrated network of pipes to service the township communities and irrigators currently reliant on the Lower Lakes. In addition, the government has provided an extra \$200 million to the South Australian government to be invested in a long-term response to the environmental problems facing the Lower Lakes and the Coorong.

It is the Rudd Labor government that is acting now when it comes to the Murray-Darling Basin for the short term, for the medium term and for the long term. We are not going to rely just on quick fixes—no more passing the buck; no more saying it is up to someone else to sort this out. The Rudd government is providing national leadership. We are not trying to play politics with this issue, running around telling each constituency a different answer, a different solution, and telling each community that they are No. 1. We are saying the Murray-Darling Basin is No. 1. Protecting the entire basin for the future is No. 1. It will be cold comfort to particular communities if they get a disproportionate share of water in the short term, only to find the river system is degraded beyond repair. What will it profit anyone to have ample water now if the whole river system is a disaster? It will be a short-term, shallow victory from which we all suffer in the long term.

More than anything else, we need rain. We need vast amounts of rain to fall throughout the country and to flow down our rivers, but we cannot make it rain. I should probably qualify that statement: most of us believe that we cannot make it rain. Perhaps an exception is the Leader of the Opposition, who, as the previous shadow minister for the environment, thought he could make it rain by spending \$10 million on scientifically dubious Russian cloud-seeding machines against departmental advice. However, the Rudd Labor government is focused on what we can do, and what we can do is put in place the long-term water infrastructure that is required. What we can do is put the right framework in place. That is what we are doing—establishing a national authority with the responsibility of administering the basin in the national interest. We are investing billions of dollars to do what needs to be done—buying back water entitlements, improving water harvesting and making water use more efficient both in the basin and outside of the basin.

We are also investing in alternatives which can help alleviate the pressure on the Murray-Darling system. The Rudd Labor government has invested \$1.5 billion in infrastructure which will use water more wisely and efficiently from other sources. This includes water recycling, desalination, stormwater harvesting and grey water reuse. Projects to use water more efficiently have already started in my electorate of Kingston. In April this year, the Minister for Climate Change and Water, Senator Penny Wong, announced formal funding of \$34 million for the Water Proofing the South project, a large-scale water recycling project run by the City of Onkaparinga. These projects will enable

high-quality recycled water to be used in industry, gardens and playing fields rather than mains water.

In addition, the Rudd government has announced a further \$3.5 million to help 120 McLaren Vale irrigators to move from mains water to recycled water. This project aims to substitute 780 million litres of mains water with recycled water. The funds will provide grants for irrigators to cover the costs of connection to recycled water and also the water licence fee. Using recycled water from the southern suburbs of Adelaide is not only important to reduce our reliance on the Murray-Darling system but will also improve the health of the Gulf of St Vincent, which suffers significantly from the discharge of high-nutrient water.

These types of projects are possible because of this government's significant commitment to invest in water infrastructure. The Rudd Labor government has committed \$1 billion for the National Urban Water and Desalination Plan, \$250 million for the National Water Security Plan for Towns and Cities and \$250 million for the National Rainwater and Greywater Initiative. The bill before us today also provides for a more uniform approach to regulation by extending the ACCC's regulatory role, which will improve the functioning of the water market in the Murray-Darling Basin.

The need to provide for future water needs is one of the most fundamental duties we have as a parliament. The Rudd Labor government is not prepared to sit back and let the river system deteriorate beyond salvation. We are not prepared to allow for the years of neglect and petty toing and froing to continue. This government is acting now. We are putting in place the framework needed to run the Murray-Darling Basin in the interests of all Australians. We are backing that up with massive investments to achieve better water conservation and environmental flows. Let us not miss this opportunity. It is the Rudd government that is making the most significant change in water management since Federation and also laying the groundwork for the future health of our great river system. Therefore, I commend the bill to the House.