



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**PROOF**

**COMMITTEES**

**Regional Australia Committee**

**Statement**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 28 February 2011**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

**Date** Monday, 28 February 2011  
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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Sidebottom, Sid, MP

**Source** House  
**Proof** Yes  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Mr SIDEBOTTOM** (Braddon) (10.55 am)—I thank the member for New England for his excellent chairing of the Standing Committee on Regional Australia. It is nice to have some of our colleagues, the member for Barker and the member for Makin, with us today. It is a hardworking and dedicated committee made up of mainly regional members who are both affected by and live in the basins that are subject to the initial guide and some of its recommendations.

I remind colleagues of the importance of the Murray-Darling Basin itself. It 'is an area of national environmental, economic and social significance'. This is certainly recognised by the Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Mr Burke, and the Minister for Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government, Mr Crean, in their interpretation of what should happen in the basin.

It contains Australia's three longest rivers, the Darling, the Murray and Murrumbidgee—as well as nationally and internationally significant environmental assets, such as wetlands, billabongs and floodplains ... The Basin is Australia's most significant agricultural area, and produces around \$15 billion of produce annually. It extends across four states and the Australian Capital Territory, and is home to over two million people.

The committee itself has been burrowing away fairly productively since December. Indeed, something like 600 submissions have been received by the committee and its hardworking secretariat. I must pay tribute to the secretariat, the terrific work they are doing and the support that they are giving the committee. We have been on the road for 14 days going to 13 major locations spread across New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria. As the chair mentioned, we are soon to go to Queensland and laer, to make sure we honour our commitment to go to Swan Hill, in Victoria.

We have been to Broken Hill, the Menindee Lakes, the Coorong, the Lower Lakes and the mouth of the River Murray, Murray Bridge, Mildura, Bendigo, Shepparton, Deniliquin, Griffith, Tamworth, Gunnedah, Bourke and Dubbo. We are soon to go to St George, Dirranbandi and Goondiwindi in Queensland. That gives some appreciation of where we have been and where we are going. The committee has also had numerous meetings—in fact, we now meet twice a week—to take submissions and to hear directly from

witnesses. We thank all those people who have gone out of their way to makes submissions; they have been excellent in their concern. They share that with the committee.

As the chair mentioned, the committee were concerned to get some of the issues that we had picked up time and time again on the road communicated to Minister Burke. I have been really pleased that the minister responded in his Dubbo irrigation meeting forum on 18 February. I think it indicates that there is not only a willingness to make sure that we arrive at some consensus to deal with the environmental, the economic and the social but also a preparedness to act. I believe the tone within the Murray Darling Basin Authority has changed, particularly with the change in chair, and our meetings with them seem to indicate a preparedness to substantially look at the implications of their recommendations. We find that very important and encouraging.

The chair has alluded to some of the issues raised from going around the country and getting submissions, particularly the use of strategic buybacks. I think a greater recognition of prior works and measures invested by communities and state governments is important. Other issues are the rollout of infrastructure in investments, including the resolution of the taxation issues that the chair commented on earlier, and accounting and measuring environmental works. Measures as a means of reducing the gap required to achieve the SDLs are really important. It is okay to have accountability on the use of irrigation waters, for instance, but we also need similar measures and accountability on the use of environmental waters, just to name some. I think the committee is working well and I thank all my fellow members for their hard work.