

Towards Water Sustainability

Sir Henry Parkes made a memorable speech at the Melbourne Intercolonial Conference in 1867 on the issue of federation at which he said "...I think that the time has arrived when these colonies should be united by some federal bond of connection.... I regard this occasion, therefore with great interest because I believe it will inevitably lead to a more permanent federal understanding". The federation, which eventuated in 1901, has arguably not faced a more significant national issue than the water reform crises. In a historic meeting on the 25th of June 2004, the 'colonies united' at the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and signed off on a national water plan that will aim, over time, to resolve this century-old debacle. Interestingly, Western Australia did not commit to the plan as it saw 'no benefit' – few would know that Western Australia similarly did not commit to federation when the referendum was held in 1899, and held out for another year.

For the past 12 months the states and federal governments have been working on a plan to enable water entitlements the same legal basis as land, so that water rights could be traded across the nation. Under the agreement, \$500 million will be delivered to returning water to six environmentally sensitive areas on the Murray River. At the centre of the agreement will be a national water commission, which will have an independent chair and three representatives from the states and federal governments. The commission will oversee the formation of a national system to trade water, with the federal government committing funds to projects such as converting open water canals into pipes. Under the agreement, farmers will be responsible for the first three per cent of the cost, the second three per cent being split 66:33 between the Commonwealth and the states, whilst the remaining will be split 50-50 between Commonwealth and the states.

In the midst of a drought gripping much of Australia, the 2002 Wentworth Report argued that the state of our environment is not a result of the drought, but has been caused by poor policies and poor management. Whilst the recent water plan has gone some way in addressing the concerns raised by this report, there is still much to achieve so as to correct the mis-management of this precious Australian resource in the driest continent in the world. To use the words of Sir Henry Parkes' that "a new constellation in the heavens, and the footprints of six young giants [the colonies] in the morning dew" in describing the emerging federation, lets hope that this new collective agreement reduces the 'ecological footprint' of the now somewhat older and wiser 'giants'.

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