



Daniel Connell *One River* Symposium Address

This is the text of an address given by *One River* Reference Group member, Daniel Connell, at the final of three *One River* Symposia, presented under the banner of *Critical Undercurrents*. This session was held in the Visions Theatre at the National Museum of Australia on Sunday 25 August, 2013, in partnerships with the People and Environment Program of the NMA.

25 August 2013, National Museum of Australia.

The theme that I'm going to be talking about this morning is that of communities. Basically I'll be talking about how that's really been at the centre of the whole development debate about the Murray-Darling Basin for the past 150 years. How do you create communities? How do you protect them? How do you develop them? What are the purposes of these communities and what are the interests that they represent? I argue that it's much more diverse than we normally think.

One of the perennial discussions is about the role of irrigation. Irrigation is central to the way in which the debate about the Murray-Darling Basin has been conducted over the last 120 years. But I want to argue is that there is a lot more involved than irrigation. Irrigation is very important and I don't want to suggest that it's not. But the oppositional narrative of "irrigation vs environment" – this is really a very unproductive kind of conflict.

As you all know, the Murray-Darling Basin extends all the way from southern Queensland down through New South Wales, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory and then into South Australia - it's very much a federal story. It's a very central story to the history of the Australian national development from the point of view of South Australia in particular. It was certainly one of the most important issues, and for many South Australians *the* most important issue, that caused them to be interested in federation. So we've got an area with four different states and the ACT and then in addition to that the national government itself. So we have actually got six jurisdictions that are conflicting about how this area should be managed and should be developed. But central is the fact that it's one basin and, somehow or other, we need to try to assert that and work out practical ways to turn that vision into something that influences what happens in policy and in management.

Paddle steamers are of course one of the great historical icons of the Murray-Darling Basin. This was originally the first reason for the Murray-Darling Basin to be developed and Adelaide dreamed of seeing itself as something similar to New Orleans on the Mississippi. I grew up in South Australia and went to university in Adelaide. The idea of Adelaide as New Orleans is a very attractive idea. It wasn't the one I experienced, although we did have the Adelaide Festival that was beginning to head that way. This is a very important phase. We tend to think of it as something that's in the dim past, but actually out of that early period when people were concerned, particularly South Australia, about trying to get the area sort

of shaped with weirs and barrages et cetera so that it would be suitable for navigation, we actually put in place an infrastructure that is no longer relevant to having paddle steamers commercially going up and down streams in the Murray-Darling Basin. But communities throughout the Murray-Darling Basin had built themselves around the particular shape that the river has taken around that infrastructure. So that infrastructure and that period still continues to have a very big impact on the way in which people live in the Murray-Darling Basin.



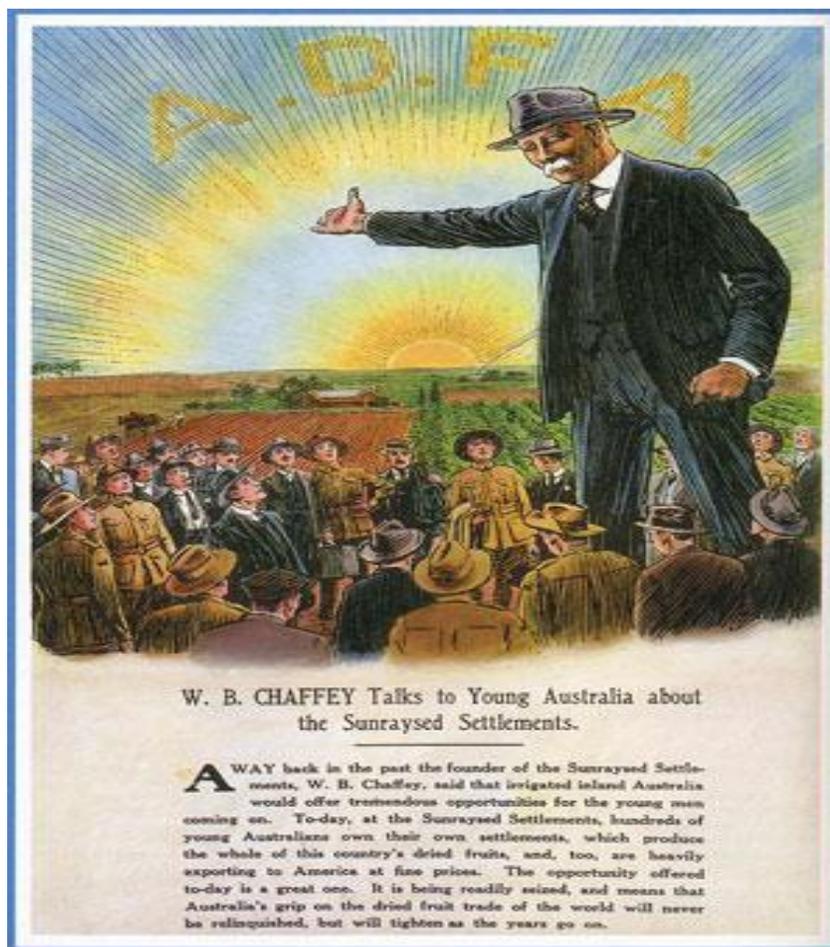
Alfred Deakin: we know of him as Australia's second Prime Minister and one of the most important people in writing the constitution, but his first great cause was the cause of irrigation in Victoria when he was a young minister in his early 30s in the Victorian colonial government. This particular cartoon shows him in his campaign to transform the area and use a very large amount of state money to transform northern Victoria. As you can see when you look at this cartoon, it's obviously drawing on the biblical references that would have been obvious to people at the time - this is Moses striking the rock and providing water to his people, the cartoonist obviously with a sardonic touch. You can see down there on the lower right the public purse is also being struck, so there was a big debate about the amount of money that was going to go into this.

But the idea that Deakin had was that water was not just something about pipes, channels and things like that, he saw it as a way to create communities within the Murray-Darling Basin where you would have a large number of people all closely living together with

independent small holder lots. He saw this as the foundation for the democracy that Victoria was very proud of in terms of the way in which it was leading the way in all sorts of innovations. The idea of not having pastoralists and people like that with their tendencies to pull the system back into a very hierarchical bunyip aristocracy-type system with the western district and things like that, he saw irrigation as way of bringing a new type of person into the political system of Victoria.

He also saw it as a way of bringing urban civilisation - he was a very urban orientated person - and of creating centres within the Murray-Darling Basin along the river that had all the civic qualities and the civilised qualities of urban areas. He was very dismissive of what was involved in rural life in the pastoral sense.

Deakin also played a very big role in the Chaffey brothers coming out. They established some of the first and most important communities in terms of their numbers and influence - Renmark in South Australia and Mildura in Victoria.



I have always liked this illustration, which comes from *A History of Mildura*. That's one of the Chaffey brothers, and he looks very like the illustrations that you'd see of Mao and Stalin in the 1920s and 1930s. It's interesting these sorts of super life figures basically leading their people and playing this command and control type role establishing these

colonies along the river. In that group you can see quite a few returned servicemen and all those sorts of people. This is very much part of the nation building story of Australia.

I think it is very important to understand their place in that nation story. When you look at some of the feeling that has been in the debate about water in the Murray-Darling Basin over the last 10 to 20 years, there's a strong sense of betrayal in those river communities about the way in which they're being portrayed in the national press as destructive to the environment and things like that. For 100 years, they were very much taught to see themselves as part of the process of creating a settled European-style Australia. For better or worse, that's the way they saw themselves. So there's a strong sense of betrayal when they see the national connection.

One thing I want to argue in my talk this morning is that we do need to move beyond that particular vision of the appropriate types of communities in the Murray-Darling Basin. We do need to think of it as a place which is much more diverse and which has communities with a much wider interest than just irrigation.



Sandbagging the river at Berri to keep the irrigation pumps running during the drought, December, 1914.
(Photo: Department of Lands, Berri)

The river that we know is actually very different from the river that existed for hundreds of thousands of years. Just to get an idea of the variability of the older river - the pre-Hume Dam river, the pre-regulated river – here's a photograph of a small dam that's been put across the river in South Australia to try to get a little bit of extra depth into the river so that they can continue to drain water out of it for some of the irrigation pumps that are along the way. It gives you an idea of how at particular times you could have very low flow.

One of the other things that's very interesting about this particular photograph is that at this time, this is the drought of 1914, Morgan - which has been the place where they measure salinity along the Murray-Darling Basin, and it's the sort of standard measure that has been used for a very long period of time - at this stage hit salinity levels of over 10,000 ECs. Now at 2,500 ECs people can drink for very brief periods. Basically at 10,000 ECs, it is

not possible to use that for drinking water for people, for animals or for plants in any sort of way. It just shows that left to itself the river is a very variable and sometimes hostile force.

Hume Dam is the major storage on the river which has transformed it and which has made it possible to provide water security for communities, for industry and for a whole lot of activities right down the river. It's the iconic and central and strategic sort of storage. This has been a major part of the story. In a sense, it was the building of Hume Dam completed in the 1930s that transformed the river and made it the river that we now know today, for better or worse.

We've been through a period of enormous expansion through the twentieth century. But come the 1970s and the 1980s, we had clearly got to the limits of the sort of development that we were undertaking and getting away with those sorts of developments and still having a reasonable river.



This is a photograph of Milang Jetty. I grew up in Strathalbyn. We've been asked to talk about our personal connections with the river. I spent a lot of my time as a teenager canoeing on this lake, Lake Alexandrina, and swimming where you can see the grass now - that's where I used to swim as a child. This area was - and still is in many ways but not as much as it used to be - a beautiful place of enormous significance to me. It was an area that before they built the barrages, again, that was a period that I didn't experience - that was in the 1940s - that absolutely transformed that area, and maybe we'll hear more a bit later about life on the Coorong and that sort of area. This particular photograph in a sense represents the limits of whenever you want to take more out of the Murray you just allocate more or you just increase the development pressure. Effectively what this photograph means to me is recognition that we've come to the absolute outer limits and gone way beyond them in terms of development pressure. Further use of the river basically required increasingly sophisticated, smart management. That's the crisis that we've been in

for the last 20 or 30 years.

We're talking about how should the river be managed, what does sustainability mean. Sustainability is very much like that: 'Lord make me good, but not yet.' When you think about a long-term development strategy for the Murray-Darling Basin, there comes a point where ongoing decline - and that's what we've been operating on for most of the twentieth century - is not a rational basis for long-term planning. At some stage you have to stabilise and say, 'Okay, they're the limits we're going to work within.' Well they're the limits that we hit 20 or 30 years ago. That's what a lot of this debate about the Basin Plan for purchasing water to improve environmental conditions has been about.



Community consultation: This has become a very well-known photograph of what happened at Griffith. Effectively, the process of trying to develop a more diverse notion of what should be happening in the Murray-Darling Basin has been a very painful process. It's quite reasonable and appropriate that people express themselves strongly and argue their case. But, essentially, when we look at the whole idea of taking water back from the over-allocation that's taken place over the last 100 years and reallocating it to the environment and all sorts of other cultural uses, what we're talking about is restoring and protecting the communities where people live.

It's very important when you think about purchases of water for the environment that you not see it as production versus the environment and as some sort of alien, anti-people type thing. Effectively, water for the environment means protecting the areas where people live; it means making them continue to be attractive places to live; it means protecting the values that exist in those places.



This is the last slide that I just want to finish on - this is Mildura. I've only got one slide that I've put there along with it, because I didn't want to make the story too diverse, complex and confused, I just wanted to bring forward one of the alternative values that need to be taken into account. These communities, for example, are no longer just irrigation communities; they're communities where a lot of people live who could live somewhere else. A lot of retired people live along the river. My argument is that, if we were to allow continuing expansion of irrigation and allow the river to degrade, we'd effectively be turning these places into very unattractive places to live. What that translates into is population movement. People who are retired can retire wherever they like, and it means that these places would shrink in size. That would have enormous economic impacts.

That's just an economic argument for why we need to take a diverse approach to thinking about communities along the Murray-Darling Basin. I'm sort of forced into this economic perspective rather against my will because there are many other aesthetic and cultural things that are also extremely important that need to be taken into account and that we need to preserve along the Murray-Darling Basin system.