

ALFRED DEAKIN LECTURE

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THE CITY AND THE BUSH – THE WATERS DIVIDE

Leith Bouilly, Chairman

Community Advisory Committee to the Murray Darling Basin Ministerial Council

Today I am not going to talk about sustainability – that word that all of us use but none of us can define – instead I am going to talk about survival – the survival of the city and the bush. I will suggest that our rivers can unite us all in the spirit of survival.

When I think about the Australian landscape there is a picture in my mind and a song in my heart – the vision and its song represents my river country – it is a landscape in which people are a central and integral element – without the people the landscape loses meaning.

The river country landscape is constantly changing – this change is part of the natural order of life in the bush and the city. In river country where extremes in climate are the norm I see and feel and celebrate drought, fire and flooding rains – all things that bring new life and hope for the people who work and live in river country.

For me our rivers are our 'mother', our lifeblood – one way or another they link us no matter where we live – through story, experience, need and often conflict.

My river country makes me who I am and gives me my sense of place. I do what I do so that my grandchildren will see my picture, hear my song and share my river country. This is my story but I am only one.

So lets cross the river and hear the songs and stories of others.

On a bend in the river stands a great river red gum.

Its roots are deep. Perhaps deep enough to penetrate the geological layers that represent the formation of the river over millions of years. Like most things on this ancient continent the process of evolution from inland sea to River Basin was not quickly completed. This tree represents the descendents of generations of different species that have slowly spread through the landscape, stabilising soils and securing an ecosystem of quiet abundance.

Beneath this tree is camped Ngarnepi and his family - a clan of the Ngarrindjeri people. Their roots are deep in a different way - deep enough to know another story of how the river was formed.

In the Dreaming, Ngurunderi travelled down the River Murray in a bark canoe, in search of his two wives who had run away from him. At the time the River was only a small stream below the junction with the Darling River.

Ponde (a giant codfish) swam ahead of Ngurunderi, widening the river with sweeps of its tail. Ngurunderi chased the fish, trying to spear it from his canoe. Near Murray Bridge he threw a spear, but it missed and became Long Island. At Tailem Bend he threw another: the giant fish surged ahead and created a long straight stretch in the River.

At last, with the help of Nepele (the brother of Ngurunderi's wives), Ponde was speared after it had left the River Murray and swam into Lake Alexandrina. Ngurunderi divided the fish with his stone knife and created a new species of fish from each piece

For 40,000 years the Ngarrindjeri and their ancestors have lived along this river and told their stories of its origins. The many species of fish that fell like scales from Ngurunderi's stone blade have been their staple food.

Ngarnepi carries in himself, knowledge of the traditions of his people, traditions that have themselves been passed down through time like a great river. He camps on a bend in the physical river - but he *is* a bend in the temporal river. He knows the song-lines of his people and the ceremonies that bring tribes and clans together. He knows the names of the other peoples up and down the river - he knows where their country is found and respects their Dreaming.

As Ngarnepi looks on, his wives chew bullrush roots to yield the fibre for a net they are making to catch fish in the river. It is slow work but Ngarnepi and his family are grounded in different sense of time, anchored in the slow rhythms of the river and its seasons, and the comfort of a Dreaming, which touches the roots of their world and gives it meaning.

Now, in the season of plenty, he and his people eat the eggs of swans and coot, ducks and water hen. Their country yields quandongs, yams and other wild food along the river. It is rich country, and reliable. Yes, some years are drier and harder. But even when the season is hard Ngarnepi does not doubt the reliability of his land - did not the fish *form* the river when chased by a man? The processes of hunting and fishing have shaped the very sources of the landscape - how can they but refresh and renew his country?

On a bend in the river stands a great river red gum.

By the tree stands Charles Campbell. The tree stands like a sentinel between his farmlands and the river. The farm has a frontage of forty miles and reaches some twenty miles back - "with flats subject to frequent inundations covered with really splendid forests of red gum". It is said that the first explorers noted it on their passage and pulled in here to camp in

1830 - at the time, there were those who described the scene as - "sterility on either bank with the river of life flowing between".

From the first day he took up the land, Charles's great-grandfather, Joseph, would walk down from his tiny homestead cottage through the native red gum forest to stand by this tree and watch the lazy passage of the river. Four succeeding generations of his family would keep the habit.

At first it was a rite of serenity - an almost unconscious acknowledgment that the river had tamed this land more effectively and more easily than the men who followed after with axe and plough. After a day's hard labour, Joseph would stand under the gum tree by the river and watch the setting sun on its languid waters.

As he cleared the lands around his small homestead according to the government's directive, the evening lullaby of the river became less an encounter with slow mystery as a visit with a friend.

Within thirty years steamers were beginning to ply the river, their great paddles sweeping the waters as they opened up the river as a highway, a snaking thread of commerce and trade. Between the farmer's axe and the boilers of the paddle steamer the landscape was slowly but irrevocably changed. Every thirty-two kilometres the steamers would stop and refuel - two tonnes of the ancient trees were burned for every hour's steaming.

Up and down the river there was development, development that would see Joseph's son take the river's water onto his land for irrigation. This was a small development at first. – but, over time as the government invested huge amounts of public money in dams and weirs and channels to guarantee security of water supply to irrigation farmers, he increasingly used and became reliant on the abundant freshwater of the great river. His nightly trips to the tree had seen him gradually recognise its flowing waters not as mystery or friend, but as resource.

The hard work of the pioneers had matured into the energy and optimism of these twentieth century citizens. As their farms became more fruitful they looked further a field and began to form links with other colonists - links driven by trade and communication and concerns for continental defence, all issues on which they could agree. But - on the great river that flowed across four of their States and cradled their new Capital Territory they could not agree. The independence of their fathers and the sense of owning their stretch of river, as they owned their land, persisted.

Communities grew comfortable and then rich. The promise of their ancestors was being realised, and with a growing sense of satisfaction and destiny fulfilled, Charles stood by the tree as his forefather's had for a hundred years and watched the river on its passage to the sea.

On a bend in the river stands a great river red gum.

Beside that great tree, close enough for shelter and that feeling of security but distant enough to avoid a falling branch stands the tent of the Jackson tribe. Sally Jackson and her family make this trip most years. It's their holiday, but also a kind of pilgrimage, an escape from their comfortable brick veneer house and their not quite so comfortable brick-veneered life in the city.

There is something about the river - the peacefulness of it. This tree and the slow swirl of the river are significant to her. Here, 'water' and 'country' are brought together - it's a different kind of 'Australia' to the one experienced by the thronging crowds of holiday makers at the beach.

There's always fishing - the family enjoy that. If some of the usual crowd are sharing the camp area with them there will be water ski-ing on the straighter reaches. There is the reading of books on the long days and the camp fire by night. There is the watching of the bush, the reading of the river that even city folks (with their neon-dazzled gaze) learn a little of over time.

Without really knowing why, Sally has noticed changes over the years, more pronounced this time: the thinning and drying of the forest, the drop in water level and the speed of the current. She has also noticed rapid expansion of rice paddies, vineyards and rural residential development around the nearby town. While the river never fails to revive and refresh her spirits there is something tired in the experience this year, something faintly worrying at the back of her mind.

On a bend in the river stands a great river red gum.

These days it is a solitary reminder of a once great forest. Beside that tree stands a newcomer - Alf Jones. Alf doesn't come from the land. He made his wealth in the city and the world of finance. Like so many of his generation Alf "knows" change. He has made a lot of money, but he's lost a lot of living. On the other side of a divorce and a great deal of searching about his lifestyle, Alf has re-married, reorganised his life and bought a farm on the river.

Alf is part of a new breed of farmer - skilled with tools of science and economics, responsive to world markets, attuned to the measurement and management of the inputs that make agriculture profitable.

While it was a business decision to get into this investment, Alf could feel the farm 'belonged', somewhere in his soul. There was a wildness and freedom about it - space to live and allow the spirit to grow. There was some distant, incoherent memory that seemed to beckon, a spirit of adventure and creation, balanced by the financial skills he had already honed and the scientific skills he could learn or buy in.

It was only later as salinity and pesticide contamination reared their ugly heads that he began to realise just how complex the river system and its lands were. He had never encountered the concept of the triple bottom line in the city business world – the need to be accountable for environmental and social responsibilities started to weigh heavily on his mind.

Alf found that his 'dream' was actually built on soils that were affected by the way his neighbours applied their irrigation water, and the way people far up-river that he had never even met took water from the tributaries. The city he thought he had left far behind had sunk its pipelines into the river like a kid with a straw in a can of Coke. There was no way *they* could shake the can to see how much was left. They also poured their pollutants into the river and treated it with as much respect as a sewer. Runoff water from farms and cities flowed down and polluted his river country and farm produce.

Alf became involved in the local meetings, beginning to understand how the catchment functioned. He learned to watch the politics of the river, from the local town anxieties over economic futures, to the grandstanding and squabbling of the politicians in the Capital over water Caps and trade-offs with all the vested interests nipping at their heels. He couldn't find anyone to hold accountable.

Gradually he came to see the tree as an ally, as an ancient sentinel whose deep roots were the anchor as much of the future as the past. The roots of this tree and many others stabilise soils and ground water, the branches reaching up to welcome bird and possum, stitching earth and sky together to make a home for human beings. Living with this tree, and learning from the mystery of this tree, must be part of how he would live in this land.

COMING TOGETHER

Around that tree many people have stood and watched the procession of the water. We see them as individuals - Ngarnepi, Charles, Sally and Alf, their ancestors and children, all those who have depended on them for the food in their bellies and the wool on their backs. We see *different* dreams, different Dreaming. We hear the sounds of different technologies - from digging sticks to paddle steam and diesel pump. We feel different ways of setting boundary and holding relationships - from the ancient tribal boundaries of settled custom, to the fresh selection of 'virgin lands' that promised an open future, to the purchase of tired or vulnerable country that needs tender care and wise stewardship.

We see them held in different constellations of society that spread around the river country. An open, simple tribalism that cannot threaten the river's stability. A frontier society, blind to what it displaces in its own struggle and tenuous grip on the land, but full of hope and optimism in an open and limitless future. An urban society that has a tenuous, intermittent but significant relationship with the river country. An emerging technological society aware of the limits to growth, sensing the importance of managing a pressured, limited, turbulent, competitive environment.

These are four stories - four different ages, four different perspectives on the river. For generations people have stood by the trees of the inland rivers of the Murray-Darling Basin with experiences like these.

These are the people who have created and continue to create the river country landscape.

People see the world with eyes that frame reality through the lens of their stories, dreams and ways of knowing. What they have seen as they gazed on the river has been the reflection of their own fantasies seen in the water at sunset. These reflect their own inner anxieties and needs, their creative urge to transform the world around them. They have constructed their world along the boundaries of their own imagining - from the primal understanding of each nation's 'country' and the creation stories (respected by Ngarnepi) to the complex science and competing politics of the world of Alf the agri-businessman.

If we are to understand river country and manage it for our survival - it is not enough for the learned few to have technical data and scientific mastery – the science must be understood and tempered by the living knowledge of the people of the river country.

If they all stood by the river today - Aboriginal ancestors, nineteenth century farmers, modern urban dwellers and contemporary agri-business farmers - they might agree that the worlds they constructed and the river country they knew, has changed beyond recognition.

The descendents of Ngarnepi would see a people and a culture that has been largely scattered and lost to the land. The deep connection of Aboriginal people to the river country has not been valued by the emerging Australian society even though their culture evolved patterns of land use and resource exploitation that have ensured survival for thousands of years. From the perspective of this ancient culture the river is dying and no one wants to share their living knowledge.

The inheritors of the pioneer farms would see themselves struggling to find a place and be valued in this highly urban Australian community - farmers are no longer landed gentry and the once rich and seemingly inexhaustibly river country is degrading. If another descendent of the Campbell's still works the family farm, grounded in the old ways, he is being told that he must work for regeneration of the country. There are few options that he can afford and no certainty that any will bring back the river country.

The tourists like Sally would find the forests drier still and river flow diminished over long stretches of their river compared to many years ago. They would drive through farmlands producing much of the food and fibre that makes their urban lives possible, without perhaps recognising some of the deep changes occurring within that river landscape.

The modern farmers like Alf, would see the symptoms of the system-wide problems brought about by the introduction of European farming practices to an ancient river landscape. Alf would be afraid that his dream of starting a new life in river country will be destroyed by the actions of faceless farmers, bureaucrats and politicians. But, Alf is

determined to find the people he needs to work with and save the river country. How can he do this?

The persistent unruliness of people, their different ways of seeing the world and ordering their actions in it, is the background for the work that we need to do if rising generations are to share our river country and its song.

"The problem with people is that they are hard to get on with.

They lie and cheat, and do things the way they want, which is rarely the way I would have them behave.

People put their own meaning on events, actions and situations.

They make their own decisions, have their own value sets and their own agendas.

They live life to their own standards and relate in their own ways.

People have their own weaknesses and their own strengths.

They perceive me and my actions their way, not the way I would have them do so.

People insistently, steadfastly and uncompromisingly go on being themselves."
Cairnes, 1998

If we could bring together all the generations who have lived by the river, who have made their homes on its banks and made their living from its waters and its soils, could they share their meanings and values in ways that would lead us beyond 'steadfastly and uncompromisingly going on being ourselves'?

If we could speak honestly across the generations and the cultures of our river country we might find that the myths that carry our 'truth' about the river share a common structure. Just as the Ngarrindjeri creation myth sees the processes that formed and sustain the river as an extension of their form of exploitation of its resources each of us can see the river as the answer to our *individual* needs.

The nineteenth century farmers and early irrigation engineers saw in the steady flow of a river a reflection of their view of *progress* – a *limitless* resource providing the opportunity to green a brown land and feed the world.

The twentieth century engineers and water managers saw the river as a challenge and resource, to be dammed and managed and tamed.

Highly capitalised modern agribusiness in the twenty-first century sees the river as a channel delivering the right amount of water at the right time and of sufficient quality to produce the food and fibre demanded by the market.

The mythic structures and material interests represented in the stories continue to co-exist – conflicts arise because many of the competing claims can no longer be completely satisfied. We can see that without a change in how we perceive and value the river country all our imaginary figures will continue to stand under the tree, projecting their meanings

onto the river extracting their own value *from* the river – failing to address the issue of human survival in the landscape.

THE FUTURE

Alfred Deakin said, “No nation ever claimed national greatness which relied upon primary industry alone”. In terms of the National Accounts, agriculture stands at 2.8 % of GDP. But agriculture uses more than 60% of our land mass and up to 80% of river flow.

We have been mining the river and her landscape to create the wealth the city and the bush have come to enjoy. Our river country is telling us to stop. Besides the feelings each of us carry in our hearts, the reality is:-

- Our most precious resource - water is scarce and valuable and because we are degrading it, it is becoming scarcer.
- The cumulative offsite impacts of 200 years of agricultural and urban activity have created catchments within which the land resources are degrading and polluting our rivers with salinity and other contaminants.
- Market prices for food and fibre do not cover the full cost of production and farmers are forced to run down the natural capital in order to continue to trade.
- There is conflict emerging over resource use and sharing between individual farmers, between communities, between states and sometimes between the city and the bush.
- The management of our natural resources, the basis of our envied lifestyle is not entrenched as a core responsibility for public investment like health and education. Rather it depends on grant schemes, sell offs and handouts at election time.

So what do we need to do?

We know we have choices to make about the way we use and manage our river country – those choices will involve significant change and bring with them enormous costs to individuals (particularly farmers) and the taxpayer. Past and present *government policies* and the *dreams* of individuals are what have brought us to this point. It is inconceivable then, that the individual farmer like Charles Campbell’s descendents should bear the cost of change on their own. Just as the sharing of wealth in the development phase was assumed by us all, then so must we all share the cost of protecting the long-term capital asset and assisting people to change.

When you listen to the individual and collective stories out there we are beginning to hear a new language - a call for change – a commitment to our survival. Shifting language is one thing, transforming *behaviour* is another. The transformation only begins when: -

- we all recognise our shared responsibility for creating a landscape within which we can survive
- we all agree that collaboration must be the basis of moving forward rather than the rugged “individualism” that we have prized in the past; and

- we demand that our institutions and governments support joint action rather than work against it.
- we demand public investment to ensure our survival.

For most river country communities this behavioural change will occur through – adopting an integrated catchment management approach, developing genuine partnerships and applying good governance.

You might ask - what is integrated catchment management? – it is a rigorous and disciplined *process* through which people can share knowledge, develop a vision, agree on shared values and principles, make informed decisions and act together to manage river catchments and Basin's.

The recent adoption of an Integrated Catchment Management Policy by the Murray Darling Basin Ministerial Council will be seen as a pivotal decision in the future. The policy makes a statement of commitment – *“that we the community and governments of the Murray Darling Basin commit ourselves to do all that needs to be done to manage and use the resources of the Basin in a way that is ecologically sustainable”*.

Integrated catchment management recognises that science and technology are critical inputs to good decision-making but on their own, and without a social context will not be sufficient to change people's behaviour.

Central to the concept of integrated catchment management is the idea of partnerships – community, industry, business and governments working together.

If these partnerships are to be successful they must have explicit goals and the responsibilities of the partners need to be clearly defined.

We should not expect that these partnerships would always bring smooth co-operation between all stakeholders with win-win outcomes. Tradeoffs will have to be made and this will cause conflict and produce winners and losers. For this reason it is critical that the process through which decisions are made is guided by shared values and principles so that trust and commitment can be developed.

To move us forward partnerships must evolve and move from consultation to real engagement and a relationship that shares power. It is said that “knowledge is power” – critical to the notion of sharing power is the capacity of the partners to have all of the knowledge required to negotiate decisions and action – before power can be shared, knowledge must be shared.

Behavioural change is reliant on strong political leadership.

Despite the fact that partnerships are evolving there is no doubt that elected government will always retain a very important responsibility for making decisions and applying responsible governance that can never effectively be devolved to the community.

Integrated catchment management and partnerships will only be successful if they are supported by strong enabling law, policy and organisational arrangements. In my opinion the current suite of these instruments are the greatest impediments to managing river country for all of the values we wish to preserve.

For the Murray Darling Basin – contemporary issues such as the provision of environmental flows, the requirement for major land use change to address salinity, and the urgent need to conserve biodiversity illustrate clearly that governance arrangements must support rather than impede integrated catchment management outcomes. However, this will mean re-negotiation of some sovereign rights between the States. It will require the Commonwealth to take the lead in facilitating the negotiation and providing incentives to ensure the Basin is managed as an entire system. This is no small challenge but what better time to do it than in this year of the anniversary of Federation as a demonstration of our commitment to the survival of the Basin and her people.

Remember Alf – the agri-businessman. Alf was feeling threatened because he couldn't understand what was happening around him and couldn't find anyone who was responsible for managing the catchment as a whole. What he and his colleagues discovered was that integrated catchment management, partnerships and responsible governance were the critical things his community and government needed to solve their catchment problems.

Through the stories of Ngarnepi, Charles, Sally and Alf I have sought to evoke some of the different perspectives, the different meanings that people hold for their river country. I then went on to explore the management challenges facing us in our stewardship of the river systems, the need for integrated catchment management, for effective partnerships and finally, the requirement for strong leadership by governments to resolve the inevitable blockages and conflicts that arise in managing complex river systems.

From my perspective the great river systems of this, the driest of continents, are our symbolic mother. Rivers like the Murray, the Darling, the Cooper, the Fitzroy, and the Ord to name but a few are the 'umbilical cord' of the nation – they hold landscape and people together - they reflect our values and actions – their health is fundamental to our survival.

Many poets and commentators have named us a people who live in cities by the sea, looking wistfully to far places - to Europe and North America, facing the ocean horizons with the bush at our backs. We should turn around and celebrate what we have because so much of the wealth of us all is dependent on the ancient and fragile ecosystems of our river country. And I do mean the wealth of us all - the city AND the bush – no matter what our ancestry.

The Murray Darling Basin has long been a source of division and dissension in Australian history and civic life, not a symbol of unity and co-operation. There is a long history along our rivers of solitary dreaming, isolated working towards individual and sectional goals and meanings. Across the vast distances of our greatest river system we have acted, and still

act, with limited co-ordination and little understanding of one another's agendas and needs.

Scientific research and information is not enough, although it will be the foundation on which effective response must be built. Sound policy and partnerships are not sufficient, although without them nothing that is enduring will be achieved. Political resolve alone will not be adequate, although it remains a vital element of any comprehensive approach

In the end it will be *people* that make the difference.

It is us – the people who put our own meaning on events, actions and situations, and make our own decisions, who will finally decide on the future of our river country.

When I think of Ngarnepi, that mythical Aborigine, and all his people, past and present, when I think of the pioneering families and the great heritage they have left to us, when I think of Sally the tourist and all the travellers who seek solace and inspiration from the river country, and Alf, and other agribusiness men of today, I know that they will insistently, steadfastly and uncompromisingly go on being themselves.

But I also dare to believe that we have enough in common to come together, listen to each other, hear the song and read our river, and find new ways to live in the country and share the riches, and the scarcity, of its resources.

If we cannot do this, what will be the picture of the river country bequeathed to our children, and what will be the Song that they hear?

As you ponder these questions – remember that on a bend in the river there still stands a great river red gum – with its roots in the past, its branches in the present and its seeds for the future – stitching earth and sky together – creating a home for humans.

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