

## **Embattled ideals: Must visionary plans bite the dust?**

In the driest and smallest continent, the Murray-Darling Basin plays an important role disproportionate to its globally modest hydrological scale. Australia's food and fibre production conflicts with ecologically aware stewardship of the Basin in ways familiar from pre-history in agricultural societies. Australia's Water Act 2007 is accordingly to be seen as a rare and beneficial political use of enacted law to achieve nuanced social and environmental improvements. Beneath its verbal complexity and bulk, attractively simple ideas are put into operation. Unfortunately, chronic defects in a federal system of government, excessive regard for financial measures of prosperity and self-defeating secrecy of the relevant science currently combine to threaten any real prospect of successfully achieving the bold aims of the Water Act and its Basin Plan.

Federalism deprives Australia of national power fully to shape the destiny of the Basin, its water courses and its population. Contemporary reliance on Commonwealth responsibility for the external affairs of the nation illustrates the odd governmental arrangements for such a matter of acutely internal and domestic gravity. Internecine rivalries between Basin States remain the principal and likely permanent obstacles to effective government, in these areas.

Farm revenues amount to a dangerously incomplete and even misleading gauge of successful use of river water. For example, they are deeply discordant with a proper regard for traditional owners' connexions and interests.

The three State governments involved in the Basin Plan are mainly responsive to scandal, not science. Unless and until the future of the Basin becomes a significant electoral issue, there will likely be continued bipartisan mediocrity or worse, so far as concerns parliamentary politics of the Murray-Darling Basin. Properly informed debate inevitably focuses on science – but available data and scientific debate, descriptively of the past and predictively as to the future, are withheld from the public.

The present terrible drought rationally should but predictably won't produce an effective consensus on the scientifically based approach to a sustainable future for this critical part of the Australian environment.