

# 100 years of mad ideas

## The destruction of the Murray-Darling

By John Doyle

**When the Chaffey Brothers arrived in Australia in the late 19th century, they must have stumbled upon a Murray-Darling River system brimming with water. They had a vision. This would be Australia's Mississippi.**

They set about applying irrigation practices that had been so successful in the US. Soon large irrigation pipes were installed and the inevitable paddle steamers loomed into view, bringing kegs of beer and leaving with bales of wool, bags of wheat and skips of fruit. Then came the rabbits and droughts and the style of farming had to be reviewed. Maybe it was reviewed, but the practices only accelerated.

Meanwhile, Federation was proceeding apace and with the creation of states out of colonies emerged an unofficial Department of Mad Ideas (DOMI). The driving force of DOMI was the deeply held parochial view that expressed itself with customs tariffs on the borders and an inability to agree on a standard railway gauge.

So far so good.

While there was a duplication of federal bureaucracies such as health and education, there was never a federal water authority. As a consequence of states' rights over transport, they had control over the waterways, these being—in the absence of road and rail—the vital arteries of trade and communication.

The knock-on effect has been that for a river system like the Murray-Darling, Queensland controls the Queensland bit, and NSW, Victoria and South Australia their own bits. In November

and December of 2005, Dr Tim Flannery and I had the great pleasure of seeing first hand what the implications have been of allowing the states jurisdiction over the rivers. Tootling along the various billabongs and dammed pools it was hard not to conclude that the Department of Mad Ideas has spent considerable energy dedicated to the destruction of the river and has, by any standard of analysis, been doing a magnificent job.

The first task of DOMI was to install a lot of dams and weirs. This made life quite difficult for the Murray cod attempting to reach spawning grounds upriver. Next task was to introduce many exotic species of plant life such as willows to give sections of the river an English feel. But DOMI had a real head of steam up when it hatched the harebrained scheme to harvest the overflow in Queensland. This was a not unexpected outcome from the dying days of the Bjelke-Petersen regime, which issued hundreds of water licences in the last weeks of its life.

Canny station owners in SE Queensland then methodically set about buying up as many of these licences as possible and commenced the construction of dams the size of which would have warmed the cockles of the Chaffey boys' hearts. This was the most effective way of putting to an end the vital pulse system of regular small floods that for millions of years gave life to the river—but on the up side, it became possible to grow cotton in the driest continent on the planet. Meanwhile, south of the border, graziers started noticing that the regular small floods were not happening at all. They complained but were told, amongst other



John Doyle is an Australian dramatist, actor, comedian and broadcaster. His most recent documentary, *Two men in a tinnie*, involved a trip down the Murray-Darling river system with long-time friend and scientist Dr Tim Flannery.

Photo courtesy of Cordell Jigsaw.

forum

△ . . . if the states were separate nations, NSW would be at war with Queensland, and South Australia would be at war with NSW and in both instances the war would be totally justified. △

things, to 'get stuffed'. Tim observed that it was very hard to kill lignum—an ancient hardy shrub—but we noticed hundreds of acres of dead lignum as well as forests of very old river red gums dying through lack of water.

Later we were equally startled to find near the Menindee catchment area, a thousand or so kilometres down stream, permanent dams that housed drowned forests of very old river red gum. The added bonus of these large artificial lakes is that they lose roughly two metres of depth a year to evaporation.

The flowering of DOMI has seen economic prosperity flow upstream and social disadvantage flow down. As a nice wheeze DOMI has allowed the fishing season to coincide with the breeding season of the Murray cod. As fish of breeding size head off to do what nature intended, they are confronted by the before-mentioned locks and weirs impeding their progress as well as boatloads of fishermen armed with all manner of modern detection devices coupled with armies of pelicans loitering with intent around the bases of weirs. In one instance, we noticed quite a new weir that had neatly slaved up to it a small hydroelectric plant. The problem was though that the mandatory fish ladder had the fish exiting right beside the vortex swirling into the turbine, so that the few cod fit enough to make their way up the ladder were confronted by the swirling vortex, resulting in a nice raw fish stew being spewed out at the bottom of the weir, which in turn attracted more pelicans and fishermen. I'm amazed there are any fish left at all, apart from the carp, which is another problem altogether. In all fairness however, we did notice many a ladder that appeared to be working effectively.

So, as a result of 100 years of DOMI, there are clear winners and losers. Those with water licences can virtually print money. And many of those with water rights are resisting having any monitors on their equipment, so who knows just how much they are taking out. Those without water might as well just walk away, as has happened with several country towns along the river, many having all the hallmarks of a richer past than a positive future. Battling hardest of all are the Indigenous communities along the way. They have no voice at all.

In days gone by, people spoke of conservation. The term now is the linguistic elephant in the room. No one speaks of conservation anymore, because under the current circumstances it is impossible to achieve. The conservation bus has left the country.

In the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 2 November 2006, the Federal Government's spokesperson on water, Malcolm Turnbull, speaks of the success in protecting sites such as the Barmah Forest.

Having visited the famous site, I can report that the great grass forest is reduced to about eight per cent of its original size and has now to cope with the arrival of the oriental weather loach, an introduced aquarium fish breeding in unimaginable numbers with implications the scientists can only speculate about.

Now that conservation has been jettisoned, management is the only solution. And whoever becomes Solomon in management has to have clear riding instructions and they must be that the restoration of the river is the number one priority. To do this is going to mean some very hard decisions have to be made and these include removing the dead hand of state governments from any say in such management. To be blunt, if the states were separate nations, NSW would be at war with Queensland, and South Australia would be at war with NSW and in both instances the war would be totally justified. An 'I'm all right, Jack' attitude has prevailed thus far as a direct result of DOMI.

What is certain is that the government paying relief to farmers struggling on marginal farms is just throwing good money after bad. It must be understood that the reason towns came into existence along the river was due singularly to the river itself. With a river dying from assault there can be only dying towns. As I write this, the federal Government is hosting a Murray-Darling Summit with the relevant state premiers to attempt to remedy the crisis. The early announcement to come from the summit was again a triumph for DOMI. It was decided that people would be put first and the wetlands drained to provide 'temporary

*Continued on page 79*



## Continued from page 8: '100 years of mad ideas'

relief' for irrigators. As usual, when it comes to environmental issues, politicians ignore both science and common sense to serve short-term ends.

Unless all shoulders are to the same wheel and the number one priority is the restoration of the health of the river and a serious review of suitable crops for increasingly marginal land is conducted, free from the clutches of DOMI, then the future of Australia's largest river system looks very bleak indeed. If the High Court's recent decision that the corporate powers of the Federal Government can extend to workplace relations, perhaps these powers could extend to the waterways.

## Continued from page 27: 'The quest for environmentally sustainable water use'

15. National Competition Council, [www.ncc.gov.au](http://www.ncc.gov.au) at 14 December 2006.
16. J Quick and R Garran, *The annotated Constitution of the Australian Commonwealth* (1976), 887.
17. *Ashworth v State of Victoria* [2003] VSC 194, (17 June 2003).
18. *Murrumbidgee Groundwater Preservation Association Inc v Minister for Natural Resources* [2005] NSWCA 10.
19. *He Kaw Teh v R* (1985) 157 CLR 523.
20. <[www.dpmpc.gov.au/nwi/docs/nwi\\_wts\\_chapter9.pdf](http://www.dpmpc.gov.au/nwi/docs/nwi_wts_chapter9.pdf)> at 14 December 2006.

## Continued from page 72: 'Protecting personal privacy'

6. *Australian Broadcasting Corporation v Lenah Game Meats Pty Ltd* [2001] HCA 63, [163].
7. *Listening Devices Act 1992* (ACT), *Listening Devices Act 1984* (NSW), *Surveillance Devices Act 2000* (NT), *Invasion of Privacy Act 1971* (Qld), *Listening and Surveillance Devices Act 1972* (SA), *Listening Devices Act 1991* (Tas), *Surveillance Devices Act 1999* (Vic), *Surveillance Devices Act 1998* (WA).
8. *Victoria Park Racing and Recreation Grounds Ltd v Taylor* (1937) 58 CLR 479.
9. *Australian Broadcasting Corporation v Lenah Game Meats Pty Ltd* [2001] HCA 63, [41].
10. *Ibid.*, [55].
11. *Ibid.*, [107].
12. *Ibid.*, [132].
13. *Ibid.*, [187].
14. *Ibid.*, [335].
15. *Grosse v Purvis* [2003] QDC 151, [423].
16. *Tucker v News Media Ownership Ltd* Unreported, High Court, Wellington, CP 477/86 20 October 1986.
17. *Grosse v Purvis* [2003] QDC 151, [444].
18. *Ibid.*, [447].
19. *Kalaba v Commonwealth of Australia* [2004] FCA 763.
20. *Giller v Procopets* [2004] VSC 113.
21. *Ibid.* [447].
22. *Kalaba v Commonwealth of Australia* [2004] FCA 763, [6] (Heerey J).
23. *Grosse v Purvis* [2003] QDC 151.
24. The approach taken in the UK is more fully discussed in the unedited article.
25. *Australian Broadcasting Corporation v Lenah Game Meats* [2001] HCA 63, [335].
26. *Kaye v Robertson* (1990) 19 IPR 147.
27. *Australian Broadcasting Corporation v Lenah Game Meats* [2001] HCA 63, [335].
28. See, for example *Commonwealth v Tasmania* (1983) 158 CLR 1.
29. [1980] ATS 23.
30. *Australian Broadcasting Corporation v Lenah Game Meats Pty Ltd* [2001] HCA 63, [190].
31. *Ibid.*, [328].