


Some observations about the
reactionary rhetoric circumscribing
the *Guide to the Murray-Darling
Basin Plan*

Lin Crase, Sue O'Keefe and Brian Dollery

Outline

- Policy background
 - Hirschman's (1991) typology of rhetorical argumentation
 - The reactionary* typology and the public debate surrounding the Guide
 - Counter arguments of 'progressives'
 - Concluding remarks
- 

Background

- Commonwealth Water Act in 2007 formalised the Federal government's stake in water resource management.
- To 'remove the politics from water'
- Established the MDBA
- The Guide released October 2010



Response to 'The Guide'

- Angst and vocal dissent expressed at meetings in rural centres (see, for example, ABC 2010).
- Irrigation lobbyists
 - reductions in water use too severe
 - flow on effects to the wider community depicted as calamitous (see, for instance, *The Australian* 2010a).
 - **The solution offered?** additional public investment in water-saving irrigation infrastructure and a major downward revision of the SDLs



'Rhetoric of reaction'- Hirschman 1991

- ARGUMENTS OF REACTIONARIES
 - Perversity thesis
 - Futility thesis
 - Jeopardy thesis
- COUNTERED WITH
 - Imminent danger
 - Desperate predicament
 - Futility of resistance



Perversity thesis

- A policy change will not just fall short of the chosen objective and not simply produce some negative spin-offs; rather “*the attempt to push society in a certain direction will result in its movement all right, but in the opposite direction*” (Hirschman 1991, p. 11, original emphasis).
- Combines simplicity with an extreme claim




Perversity thesis and the reaction to The Guide

- Intertwines the role of agriculture and the preservation/enhancement of ecological assets
- Thus to reduce water for agriculture is tantamount to decreasing the capacity of landholders to care for the environment



Futility thesis


- Based on the view that: “the attempt at change is abortive, that in one way or another any alleged change is, was, or will be largely surface, façade, cosmetic, hence illusory, as the ‘deep’ structures of society remain wholly untouched” (Hirschman 1991, p. 43).
 - Often tied to belief in the authority of science
- 

Futility thesis


- Reformists have added strength to the reactionary argument by acknowledgement of the incompleteness of the science.
- National Irrigators' Council (2010, p. 11) recommended that “no further water be recovered from irrigators until existing environmental watering programs such as the Living Murray are assessed” (recommendation 3), as the ‘best available’ science is “clearly not very good and cannot be relied upon to provide definite answers on the needs of the environment” and “[w]ith this lack of understanding it is highly likely that the MDBA will fail to achieve its environmental objectives [...]” – thus, the policy is painted as futile.
-



The jeopardy thesis

- “asserts that the proposed change, though perhaps desirable in itself, involves unacceptable costs or consequences of one sort or another” (Hirschman 1991, p. 90).
 - ‘Wedge’ arguments
 - Zero-sum game
 - Intrinsically appealing, and seldom subject to real scrutiny. “The argument that a new advance will imperil an older one is somehow immediately plausible, as is the idea that an ancient liberty is bound to be more valuable or fundamental than a new (“newfangled”) one” (Hirschman 1991, p. 123).
- 

Jeopardy

- “[t]he older hard-won conquests or accomplishments cannot be taken for granted and would be placed in jeopardy by the new program” (p. 84).
 - E.G. two earlier achievements in this country – food security and regional development.
- 

Food security

- National Irrigators' Council has consistently proclaimed that the policy “will cost thousands of jobs, force up food prices and threaten family farms” (NIC 2010, p. 1).
- Victorian Farmers' Federation noted that “water used by irrigators is in the food on the table and clothes on the backs of every Australian, as well as millions around the world” (VFF 2010).



Regional development

- Focus on ‘community’ impacts and how policy change will “inflict permanent damage on rural communities” (VFF 2010, p. 1)
- “[t]he Australian community needs to understand that policy decisions that reduce productive use of water resources affect not just farmers and farming communities, but have strategic implications that go beyond purely environmental matters” (NSWFA 2010, p. 20).



Response by 'progressives'

- Imminent danger/synergy illusion
- Desperate predicament
- Futility of resistance



Imminent danger/synergy illusion

- In contrast to the zero-sum approach of reactionaries, reformists typically counter with the possibility of harmonious reform
- E.g. Quiggin's alternative adjustment mechanism- community (social) infrastructure



But, countered by

- “people know that there are only so many times the town hall can be painted with ‘structural adjustment’ funding” and reiterates the jeopardy claim with “[t]ake away the water and you take away the economic base – and that removes the social fabric” (Gregson 2010 p. 1).



Imminent danger

- Focus on a single element of reform-action Vs inaction.
- Presented as if the harm that would result is ‘entirely certain and inescapable’ (Hirschman 1991. p.153)



Illusory synergies and imminent danger

- statement supported by 58 environmental scientists and released as a *Scientific Statement on the Basin Plan* in December 2010:
- “...discussions so far have been dominated by concern about negative, short-term impacts. There has been little consideration of the long-term benefits of a healthy river system. **The cost of ‘doing nothing’ would be unacceptable to everyone.** Instead the **Basin Plan will offer a historic, nation-building opportunity** to correct past mistakes and plan for the future. It would enable us to maintain a healthy economy while protecting our natural heritage. It is about securing long-term security” (Kingford et al. 2010, p. 1)

Futility of resistance thesis

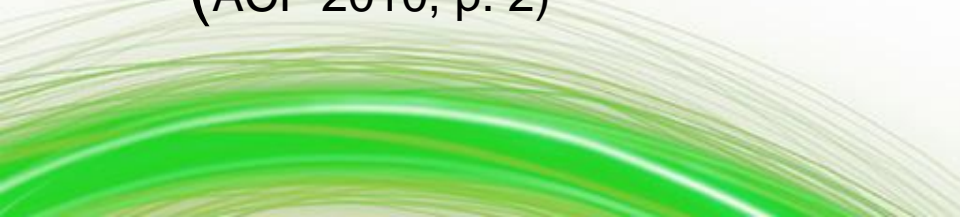
- Notion that there are some inexorable forces that prevent a policy achieving desired reform
- Some have argued that there is an element of futility in endeavouring to stave off the underlying forces that shape socio-economic change in rural areas.



Imminent danger and futility of resistance

- Unalterable trend in the environmental status of the MDB and its link to the prediction of climate change.
- E.g. Calls for the MDBA to “lead communities towards a shared vision for a healthy Basin and a clear understanding of the realities of water over-extraction, environmental damage and the future impacts of climate change upon the ability of the Basin to continue to support viable ecosystems, industries and communities”.

(ACF 2010, p. 2)



Desperate predicament thesis

- Policy advocates counter perversity arguments with desperate predicament responses- change must occur at any cost.



Concluding remarks

- Applied Hirschman's typology to analyse the development of the debate on the Guide.
 - perversity thesis- attempts at reform will ultimately prove counterproductive.
 - reform will be inevitably futile.
 - the jeopardy argument- the most prominent.
 - Reformist counter-arguments have been slow to emerge and relatively muted
 - Appear to have been taken by surprise
 - Relying on 'science as the answer'
- 