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Bullying claims another government distraction

Accusations of bullying in the divisive water debate are nothing more than “a diversion tactic”, according to the Speak Up Campaign.

And its chair Shelley Scoullar said she has “had enough” of this latest effort by people in authority to avoid tackling serious issues in regional communities.

Bullying and intimidation claims have been raised at various forums in the past fortnight, including a Senate Estimates hearing when questions were asked of Murray-Darling Basin Inspector-General Mick Keelty.

His report, on which many struggling food and fibre producers are pinning their last hopes, is due out at the end of March.

Mrs Scoullar said Southern Riverina Irrigators still had confidence the Keelty report would provide desperately needed relief, but she was “not so sure”.

“We are at the point where we have limited trust in anyone who is being paid by government. While there are solutions to our present crisis which could help, farmers and their communities continue being ignored or opposed by some with self-interest and no desire to support those in desperate need.

“When something is politically difficult we generally find the easy option is taken. I find it hard to believe Mr Keelty will do anything different to other bureaucrats. To make matters worse, I believe he has been getting advice from the MDBA; if that is the case and he accepts it, we’ll get nothing again.

“The Productivity Commission recommended the MDBA be split up. Throughout Basin Plan implementation the MDBA has refused to be adaptive or transparent with communities and, as we have been told many times, there are extreme concerns as it ‘marks its own homework’.

“Past experience tells us there is no way the MDBA will acknowledge the problems that exist or support the achievable solutions.”

Mrs Scoullar said she fears there will be anger at a level never previously seen if the Keelty report does not deliver.

“The government might be very pleased there are limits on crowd numbers, because if there is no relief from the report I would be very concerned about the prospect of mass protest and civil disobedience. And it is no wonder the frustration is at such levels. It is incomprehensible that we could get to a situation where we are importing rice because our Riverina growers, the most efficient in the world, have had virtually no water for a rice crop for two years and, under present circumstances, are not expecting any this year.

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“For over twelve months eastern states have been importing dairy and wheat to meet demands on the east coast, again because these staple food producers are watching their allocation wasted.

“We stop farmers accessing water to grow a staple crop, yet at the same time the Murray’s biggest storage, Dartmouth Dam, is at nearly 50 per cent capacity, we have continued to flood forests, pour water out to sea and allow massive evaporation of freshwater in lakes that were traditionally estuarine and fed from the southern ocean.

“While Mr Keelty has given some people confidence with his sympathetic approach at the town hall meetings, I have serious doubts that anything will change. This view has become stronger since he appeared at the Senate Estimates hearing,” Mrs Scoullar said.

She added the intimidation and bullying claims at the hearing suggested the Government was looking for a distraction.

“Those advocating for change are frustrated, but they are not bullies. We have dedicated and intelligent people who, as volunteers, do huge hours of research and present evidence and facts to governments and their representatives. But they don’t want to listen.

“I am aware of official complaints by a government employee against an advocate, but in truth it was a case of someone losing a debate, not being prepared to accept this, and using the ‘bully’ label as their defence.

“I am also aware of a long list of intimidation tactics used to silence people who have uncovered the exploitation of programs under the Basin Plan. People have come to me with shocking stories, but they are too frightened to come out publicly for fear of repercussion.

“The same goes for scientists who can see the environmental damage and the need for change, but have been threatened into silence, because their scientific opinion is at odds with government agencies.

“I believe there has been a consolidated effort to allow the NSW Murray to be the sacrificial lamb for this political plan, because nothing changes despite all the evidence, the indisputable facts and presenting solutions (which would not disadvantage any region over another, as has been claimed).

“Many farmers and community members have had enough. For two years we have asked these angry people to avoid taking this matter into the own hands, but we cannot do that for much longer.

“If the Keelty Report does not deliver, we will have lost all faith and confidence in the office of the Interim Inspector General. The great shame is that none of this would have occurred if governments had done their job in the first place – with transparency, open and honest debate, the ability to examine new evidence as it becomes available and the flexibility to adjust and be adaptive.

“This is all occurring at a time when we should be working together to ensure our staple food producing regions remain operational and water is not wasted.

“I hope my lack of confidence in Mr Keelty or governments to be proactive and supportive is born out of frustration with the system we have been dealing with, and that we can get actions which may restore it,” Mrs Scoullar said.

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