



Speech by

GORDON NUTTALL

MEMBER FOR SANDGATE

Hansard 24 August 1999

SNOWY MOUNTAINS HYDROELECTRIC SCHEME

Mr NUTTALL (Sandgate—ALP) (12 p.m.): Fifty years ago began one of Australia's greatest infrastructure achievements, namely, the Snowy Mountains Hydroelectric Scheme. The scheme's two major functions are the generation of electricity and the provision of water for irrigation. This year we celebrate 50 years of the Snowy Mountains scheme. The American Society of Civil Engineers ranked it as one of the great engineering achievements of this century.

What is the Snowy? According to Panorama magazine—

"The Snowy scheme was a brazen plan to partially trap eastward flowing rivers on the Australian Alps, turn the water westwards through vast trans-mountain tunnels and transform a drought-ravaged interior into one of the world's greatest food bowls. Along the way, 7 power stations would also generate peak-period electricity for Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra."

That great Labor Prime Minister, Ben Chifley, recognised that he had to tap into the skills of the many millions of dispossessed people in post-war Europe. He wanted them for their work skills—skills our people did not have and skills that would take quite a few years for Australians to develop.

The Prime Minister saw the Snowy as a national priority. He took advice that, because the scheme would be building generating stations thousands of feet under the earth—so that they would not be bombed—the project was therefore a defence job. Subsequently, the Act was introduced into Federal Parliament under the Commonwealth's defence power. This took care of any problems with the States and the ACT.

It would be fair to say that, during the time of construction, the environment was used more as a means to an end. The environment was being used more as a bargaining chip rather than as a true matter of concern. But, of course, at that time environmental considerations were apparently accorded low priority under the scheme.

Then came the influx of foreign workers who arrived from all over Europe—33 nationalities in all. They came to work on the project in very difficult conditions for at least two years. All had come to start a new life in this great country.

The project was launched on 17 October 1949 and took 25 years to complete. It produced irrigation areas that became some of the great food producing regions on this earth. The scheme cost \$1 billion to build—in today's figures it would cost \$5 billion. It features 16 major dams, seven power stations—two of which are underground—145 kilometres of interconnected tunnels and 80 kilometres of aqueducts. In the morning, when people in Sydney and Melbourne turn on the kettle they are effectively turning on Snowy Mountains scheme power, because it supplies the peak demand electricity for both those capital cities.

The scheme introduced the idea of building projects with large-scale contract labour against an agreed cost rather than company or staff labour. Every subbie on every building site in Australia should recognise that the idea of the subcontracting system was proved on the Snowy Mountains scheme back in the 1950s.

As we all may have read, the history of the people who came to this country and worked on the Snowy Mountains scheme is being celebrated in 1999. The 100,000 people who built the project over

25 years between 1949 and 1974 were real pioneers in infrastructure development in Australia. Two-thirds of the work force came from over 30 countries—mostly in the 1950s and the 1960s and mostly from war-torn Europe. Thousands of immigrant workers showed the world what a multicultural work force was capable of doing. Yet today many people from non-English speaking backgrounds still need to be more fully engaged in the Australian economy.

The Snowy Mountains scheme highlights how, with the help of migrants, the scheme contributed significantly to the development of Australia as a modern industrial nation. We have every reason to be very proud of those who came to Australia from many nations to work on the Snowy scheme. I think most of us in this Parliament have heard of the Snowy Mountains scheme. Perhaps not many of us really understand what those newcomers to our shores had to put up with in order to build this magnificent hydroelectric scheme.

Panorama magazine said of the workers on the Snowy—

"Their faces are raw from the spray of their water-cooled tools. Moving among them in the gloom and the confined space are locomotives, shunting and collecting rock spoil. One wrong step, or stumble, and a man can be crushed or dismembered under steel wheels. It happened frequently."

I have always thought that we here in Australia should understand our past. We have a country to which immigrants come from all over the world. They have found peace and a place of great natural beauty. The region known as the Snowy Mountains is but one part of this special place that we call Australia. But what a place it is!

Those intrepid workers on the Snowy project were heroes. Many came from far away places—distant lands—and, while maintaining a place in their hearts and souls for their respective lands of origin, they also wanted to make a new life in Australia. Our rich and multicultural Australia gained much from the workers on the Snowy 50 years ago. Their work on one of the world's supreme engineering feats was essentially the foundation on which this country propelled itself forward in the post-war era of industrial development.

A snapshot of our multicultural Australian society can be seen just by looking at the names in the local Cooma phone book. The Snowy was the birth of a multicultural Australia. As a result of mass migration Australia ceased being a basically British settlement. The arrival of immigrants from all over the world changed this country from a monocultural society to what it is today—a cosmopolitan, multicultural society with a significant degree of cultural diversity across the social spectrum.

The Snowy Mountains scheme is a unique engineering and social feat and its influence lives on via the practices, skills, attitudes and ideas about multiculturalism which were formed 50 years ago in the bleak frontier living and working conditions of the Australian Alps, that is, the Snowy.
