



Strewth, you wouldn't believe he said it



ALAN
RAMSEY

Four days ago John Howard said the magic words. Early Tuesday evening he walked into the House of Representatives and announced: "I was wrong." Sound the trumpets and mark the moment. 6.32pm, February 6, 2007. Next day Howard even repeated them. He told a beaming Kevin Rudd and a jeering Opposition during parliamentary question time: "I do not mind saying I'm wrong when I am wrong."

Rats, Prime Minister. You hate it. But now you've forced yourself to utter those three little words, why not try it more often? You could do worse than telling the truth, even at this late stage of so many years of debauching the language. Ignore the toadies and the rationalisers. You're in trouble.

Politics was awash in watery goings-on this week. Howard now brandishes his emergency \$10 billion water "plan" as fervently as Bob Hawke crossed his heart and hoped to die if his Labor government didn't honour his 1989 election pledge to plant "a billion trees". Remember?

That's when we had Hawke and the egregious Graham Richardson exploiting the imagery of the junction of the despoiled Murray and Darling rivers to announced their "billion trees" promise to "save the environment" – and save themselves. And save themselves they did. That election campaign 17 years ago ended up as Hawke Labor's fourth victory, but only on the back of Green preferences.

Although the Coalition under Andrew Peacock polled more votes overall, Greens preferences in NSW, Queensland and Perth won it for Labor in the marginals. It was a near run thing. (It was also the election that gave us Peter Costello, Simon Crean and Martin Ferguson.)

Seventeen years later and, with Kevin Rudd seizing a resurgent Labor leadership two months ago, we've got a panicky Howard Coalition suddenly indulging in the exact same imagery of throwing a hugely fat number up in flashing lights to bedazzle voters and obscure the complexity – and the Government's indolence – of a threatening policy issue.

Last election we had Howard pledging a \$2 billion "water fund" to rescue the sick Murray-Darling system. Twenty-eight months later, with 40 per cent of the money committed but not a single project yet completed, we now get a pledge of an extra \$10 billion – over 10 years – so long as Canberra has total control of how it's spent. Meanwhile, the rivers go on dying.

Overlaying the politics of the Murray-Darling's water crisis is the crisis of global warming, which Howard and his colleagues have, until very recently, insistently scoffed at. We're just going through another bad drought, stupid. Not at all, say the scientists overwhelmingly.

This week, on ABC radio, Professor Tim Flannery told Margaret Throsby he was "heartsick" at the number of politicians prone to talk down the effect of global warming. Flannery was politic enough to avoid naming our Prime Minister. Ironically, it was only a fortnight earlier that Howard had named Flannery our latest Australian of the Year.

So how serious is global warming? Flannery told ABC television's *Lateline* the night of the same day he was interviewed on ABC radio: "What we've seen in the Arctic over the last two years has been such breathtaking change that you have to worry about stability for sea levels and for the entire northern hemisphere climate system. The rate of ice melt in 2005 increased by about five times over what it was pre-

viously. It's been very, very large again in 2006.

"Now, if you take those two years as the new trajectory for ice melt in the Arctic – we've only two years of data there – but if we do that, there will be no Arctic to melt in five to 15 years, and that's an astonishingly short period of time for an ice cap that's existed for 3 million years."

If that doesn't get the attention of the Government and its obstinate global warming hardliners, nothing will. And, of course, it has.

It was the previous day, in Parliament, that Howard blundered when asked if he supported the public scepticism of his Industry and Resources Minister, Ian Macfarlane, of "the connection between emissions [global warning] and climate change". Howard replied that what mattered was "the degree of connection" and what you did about it. "The biggest response to what you do about the problems of drought in Australia at this time," he said, is "what the Government proposes doing" with its \$10 billion water plan.

Four hours later Howard went back into the House to explain that "I mistook" Rudd's question. "I was wrong to talk about climate change and drought when the question was about climate change and emissions," he said. "For the record, I do believe there is a connection between climate change and emissions." What Howard was conceding was that he had not known what he'd been talking about earlier, because he'd not understood what he'd been asked. Such has been this Government's casual attitude to the global warming debate.

It was all there in the Prime Minister's embarrassing admission.

If you think that harsh, then know that Howard boomed again during question time on Wednesday. This time he was asked by the NSW independent Peter Andren about a report by five CSIRO scientists that solar thermal technology has the capacity to meet Australia's "entire current demand" for electricity and "be cost effective within seven years". Didn't this contradict the Government's insistence that nuclear power and "clean coal" were Australia's only future energy options?

Howard: "I don't know the detail off



the top of my head of that particular study, but I am perfectly happy to have it examined and put into the mix.”

Pardon, Prime Minister?

That night, in its main news bulletin, ABC television’s chief correspondent, Jim Middleton, quoted Andren’s question. He then pointed out that Howard’s “favourite interviewer”, Alan Jones, had raised the solar research with the PM in a radio interview back in November.

“Jones offered to send on the material and Mr Howard said he’d be very interested,” reported Middleton. Howard’s office had no record of anything being received from Jones “but says the Prime Minister is aware of the work”. But not aware enough, it seems, to have remembered it when he answered Andren’s question this week.

Then there was the gaggle of stories on Thursday concerning a nine-page report – each page absurdly marked “commercial in confidence” – which “comments” on the Government’s \$10 billion water scheme.

The report was drawn up by the executive of the Murray-Darling Basin Commission, a government agency whose board of directors is chaired by the former National Party leader and Fraser government cabinet minister Ian Sinclair, and it included some highly critical comments which must have infuriated our Prime Minister.

We’d have known nothing about this report had it not been for Rudd’s front-bench colleague, Anthony Albanese,

whose “office” somehow got hold of it and obligingly leaked it to selected journalists in the Canberra press gallery. Thank you, Albo.

The report includes such gems as:

“The plan is generally silent on this subject [of natural resource management]. It is not clear whether [six nominated current programs defined as ‘major initiatives’ of the commission] will continue ... In the plan, southern Murray-Darling Basin operations do not appear to include tributaries, for example the Ovens, Campaspe, Kiewa, Loddon, Lachlan and Wimmera rivers. Is this intended?

“There appears to be insufficient funding to offset a withdrawal of jurisdictional contributions [by the states]. The Living Murray initiative is not discussed in any detail in the plan. It is not clear whether it is intended to continue or whether the states will continue to contribute the \$500 million for water recovery ... Stakeholder communications are not mentioned in the plan and are crucial to successful implementation...

“River regulations, icon site watering, water recovery measures and construction of works to deliver environmental water all have the potential to change salt mobilisation patterns and affect river salinity and impact on river health, including native fish. Future carriage of these strategies is not referenced, nor do they appear to be funded...

“Under current arrangements, jurisdictions contribute approximately

\$90 million a year. Without these, the available budget of the new commission will be decreased by approximately \$900 million over 10 years, plus a yet-to-be quantified amount from in-kind contributions ... The additional \$600 million from the plan is unlikely to be enough to support the increased activities and scope of the new commission ...”

The newspaper stories made a meal of the supposed \$900 million blackhole. But Howard’s office got busy Thursday morning and by the time question time rolled around in Parliament that afternoon Howard had a statement from the commission’s chief executive, Wendy Craik, acknowledging she was “now aware” the alleged blackhole was “incorrect”.

You bet she was “aware”.

Craik’s statement, released by Howard, concluded: “I appreciate the matter has been clarified and regret the misunderstanding and withdraw the statement quoted above [that ‘the available budget for a new commission will be decreased by approximately \$900 million over 10 years’].”

If ever this was the case, the newspaper stories of the “black hole” killed it. Yet nothing an angry Howard told Parliament could hide the fact his \$10 billion plan was a political response cobbled together in great haste to upstage Kevin Rudd’s surge in the opinion polls.

It is going to be a long year.



What Howard was conceding was that he had not known what he'd been talking about ...