

## WATER'S EDGE: TRANSCRIPT

### Season 4, Episode 1: 'Second tenure – observations with Troy'

Speaking talent	Abbreviation
Andrew Parsons – Water's Edge host	AP
Troy Grant – Inspector-General of Water Compliance	TG
Male voice – Voiceover #1	V1
Female voice – Voiceover #2	V2

V1: Water's Edge Podcast acknowledges the traditional owners of country throughout the Murray-Darling Basin in Australia, and recognises the continuing connection to lands, waters and community.

V2: Coming up in this episode of Water's Edge.

TG: We had to spend a lot of time building relationships, building agency's trust in us in the way we're going to operate professionally to get improvement, that we weren't out there as a 'gotcha' agency to embarrass anyone or to punish people. We were there simply to get improvement in water management.

AP: And when the space you're working in is a little crowded and the communities you serve aren't quite sure who does what, how can a regulator make things a little clearer to understand.

TG: Need to get clarity. Who's responsible for what? So, there's no finger pointing when things go wrong. So, there's clear accountability to who's responsible to ensure that programs and the efficient, effective spend of significant public funds is as good as it can be.

AP: We'll hear from the Inspector-General of Water Compliance, Troy Grant, as he reflects on his first four years and what people can expect for the next four years. Also, some insights to leadership, building a new agency and Troy's take on leaving a legacy when your time is up.

TG: The legacy, in all honesty, won't be something you could measure or see while I'm still here. The legacy will be, how good did we set it up for the second and third Inspector-General?

V2: You're listening to Water's Edge with your host, Andrew Parsons.

AP: Welcome to Water's Edge, a podcast produced by the Inspector-General of Water Compliance, or IGWC.

Troy Grant is no stranger to the Murray-Darling Basin. In fact, he's worked and lived in the Basin for over four decades. For those unfamiliar with Troy, he's someone whose

career spans public service in a variety of roles, including law enforcement, emergency services, social justice and charity work. In August 2021, Troy was appointed by the Australian Government as the Inspector-General of Water Compliance, an independent statutory role, for a four-year term.

Troy joins me as we reflect on his first tenure as the Inspector-General of Water Compliance. We'll also discuss what's ahead for Troy as he settles into a second four-year tenure. Now, you were reappointed in August 2025, so congratulations. For those not familiar with the process, explain the length of the Inspector-General's tenure.

TG: Well, when the Inspector-General of Water Compliance position, that's a statutory officer under the law, was created in August of 2021, a maximum of eight-years for any individual was the term within the legislation - broken into two four-year terms. So, I just completed, in August, the first four-year term after I was appointed by the Coalition Government in 2021 and reappointed for a second four years, very proudly, by the current Labor Government. So, it's just really, proud that it got the backing of both sides of the Parliament for this important role and very privileged to be able to complete another four-year tenure.

AP: And what were some of the highlight achievements in your first tenure?

TG: We had to build an office, from scratch, which was, is always challenging. We started with a very small secondment of personnel from the MDBA's Water Compliance Office and merged them with the interim Inspector-General's office to form our first team. So, we really had a lot to do with not many people from the beginning because, what we inherited was – and the reason we were created – was a state of, nobody had any trust and confidence in the management of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

So, we had to get to what were those key suspicions, complaints, or concerns and address them quickly and in and straight up through bodies of work, whilst also establishing ourselves and building an office so that we could respond to future work that came our way. Educating everyone as to what we did, who we are, why we did it, where we were was also a critically important part of those early days. And the three major concerns, I guess, when we took on the role was a lack of faith in river management arrangements on the Murray, outcomes from the environmental water holder, what was being achieved there? The lack of fairness and equity across the state regulators, was a critical concern. And, and metering and groundwater, were also issues of high priority.

So, we did three bodies of work quickly to set a bit of a benchmark, and they were reviews because all our legislation wasn't in place when we commenced that work. And we got a good guide as to the direction we needed to go from those three bodies of work. Steady as it Flows report, which is on our website for everyone to read - the Des Pearson report into government regulatory operations. So, they were really informative and helpful to get us off to a flying start.

AP: What were some of the key observations you made in the role during your first tenure regarding the Murray-Darling Basin?

TG: In alignment with the community concerns that there was inequity or not a level playing field across the Murray-Darling Basin was a big concern. And Des Pearson, through his work identified that, you know, each of the state jurisdictions were miles apart in the way they operated. Not that anyone was doing anything wrong, that they were extraordinarily different.

So, we look at things from a Basin-wide scale, and people want common water language. They want equality and penalties, and they want equality in the application of a regulatory intervention. So, the opportunity to bring those agencies together to try and overcome some of those big gaps was a priority. So, we established the Regulatory Leaders Forum, and that was the dominant message we were hearing from everybody was that – how bad the regulatory side of things was. We obviously were created out of a crisis through the 'Pumped' program in New South Wales. There was no accredited water resource plans

in New South Wales at the time. And the data inequity that was coming through, that people were trying to navigate the data differences, just wasn't making sense to people.

So, we had to bring together the regulators, which we've done. And I think that's been probably our greatest success is rather than them being, and whilst they've all got their own priorities and they still remain independent in how they operate under their own constitutions and their own priorities, they are now collegiate in relation to regulatory outcomes on a Basin-wide scale.

And we've developed products like the Metering Report Card that gives transparency about how that program is progressing, across each of the jurisdictions. And a narrative to explaining where they're up to, why they're up to and how they interpret stuff, which is important. They're also contributing to their own data on their enforcements, on their legal instruments that they're applying in their own jurisdictions, which is giving another level of transparency and gives confidence to people in those regulatory agencies. So, what I used to hear about every day – gripes and concerns, I don't hear anything about that anymore. So, I think that's a pretty good measure that that's been successful. What was a major concern just isn't spoken about now. I think we have a way to go on the relationships and the collegiality from a policy perspective. We're not a policy agency, we recognise that. But what's important to know is that best regulatory design means that the regulators in the full circle situation contribute to policy. Because we're the ones out there seeing where the gaps are, seeing where the errors in the issues are that helps inform policy design.

When we were created, there was a lot of suspicion. We weren't necessarily wanted by those who were going to be oversighted by us or held to account through our investigations or audits or inquiries, and that's a natural phenomenon, we understand that. So, we had to spend a lot of time building relationships, building agencies trust in us; the way we were going to operate professionally, to get improvement. That we weren't out there as a 'gotcha' agency to embarrass anyone or to punish people. We were there simply to get improvement in water management. So, I think we've made big strides in that regard. There's new leadership in the Commonwealth Water Division now in the department. So, I think there's a new opportunity to really make the policy integration with the work we do a lot better, which will have a significant contribution to better policy and program design into the future - about what goes into intergovernmental agreements, what goes into the assurance processes to make sure all outcomes are being achieved by the big money being spent in the projects being sought.

They get to choose what policy they go down, what strategic direction they go down to - that's not our role. And we're not trying to overreach in telling them what they need to do. What we need to do is get them to accept that when they're designing, that they need to take into consideration, to get success, the issues that we bring to their attention.

AP: Okay, so the next four years, what does it look like for you in regard to what you want to achieve and do.

TG: Well the next four years... the clock's ticking. And I've made this point clear to the team, and I never look at, what I want to achieve, or what we, what we do achieve isn't an 'I' issue, it's a 'we'. It's always a 'we' with me. Because we're as strong as the sum of all our parts in our office.

So, for us, I think 'we' need to achieve what we're after is measurable improvements in water management and outcomes of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan. And there's a massive, obvious gap to us that we've identified over the last four years of flaws in the design of the plan - compromised by the constitutional arrangements that we have in our country. Compromised by the need to 'compromise' to get people on board and participate where the rigorousness and accountability in the Basin Plan and the accountability for outcomes isn't there. We need to close some of those gaps. Accountability for outcomes has to be a priority for the next four-years and what we'll be driving for.

And clarity of role. I think that's been a big gap where, you know, different agencies - we've got the Commonwealth and five jurisdictions, we've got the MDBA, the CEWH, multiple IIOs, different regulators. There's a lot of people, I think there's 30 odd people playing in the water management space in the Murray-Darling Basin. And we need to get clarity... CMA is other - groups like... Need to get clarity, who's responsible for what, so there's no finger pointing when things go wrong. So, there's clear accountability to who's responsible to ensure that programs and the efficient and effective spend of significant public funds is as good as it can be. That's a real key part to the job going forward over the next four years.

AP: Now, you're known for getting out and about in the Basin and meeting with people on the ground. So, tell us about your most recent tour of the southern part of the Basin. What was the purpose of that tour and what were some of the key takeaways for you?

TG: Yeah, I think it was multi-pronged. For me, I've always wanted to be out on the ground in touch with the communities to hear directly from them about what's really going on. I can read and look at reports and that, but you can't beat seeing it with your own eyes or hearing it with your own ears. And there's a lot of consultation fatigue out there across the Basin. Because communities are a little bit fed up with, and I can certainly concur, I've seen evidence myself of where agencies go out and talk to them. They say they listen, but they don't hear, they don't ever enact on the feedback they're given. And a lot of the best solutions to problems out there are local and with local input and local contributions. And that's largely been ignored. They talk the talk, often. Say they're going to do it - that's 'our' intent. But it doesn't translate into actual outcomes. And then you have failings. And the biggest failing is that they excluded the local input.

So, when I'm out there, I, wanted to see the reality of the impact in South Australia that's currently being experienced. And, and the poor buggers have got a double whammy in the algae situation now because the and the algae basically started around the Coorong and then work its way north. So, they're having a tough time at the moment in certain parts. And the irony of the Basin is that, in other parts it's lush and green and even flooded. So that's just such the diversity of the million square kilometres that, that we operate in. So, making sure I was on ground to get a proper appreciation and awareness of that, connecting with the communities in that area - it's a big space, so it's hard to get around everyone all the time. But also get their feedback on how we've gone in the first four-years and what we need to focus on for the next four-years. That was a real key component of the of the trip, and I was really pleased. A lot of the feedback was that there was a lot of gratitude of the work we've done and the impacts that we've had, particularly around the accreditation of so many water resource plans in New South Wales that were completely absent. And the fact that they trust us to do what they're after, they feel that they're held to account for everything they do, and they've got confidence that we're there to hold the water managers to equal account. And that's all there after is equality.

So, that was a nice vindication after four years that we've got the community's trust. And I think surveys are saying that over 80 per cent, 83 per cent of people say we're an absolute necessity to build a trust and confidence in the Murray-Darling Basin Plan. So, just our presence there is giving them confidence that the agencies are going to do better and perform better, that we're there with the power to come in and audit and look into their operations. So, that's a positive just by our existence, let alone the individual work that we undertake.

AP: How has community sentiment changed from when you first started in the position until now? Did your most recent Basin tour give you some additional insights?

TG: Yeah, in relation to 'us' as an entity, it's positive and I'm really proud of that, and grateful for the work the team's done to achieve that result. We're not complacent about that. We know, you know, we had to go out and make people aware of us and build relationships and build respect and trust ourselves. The sentiment certainly, and we measure it in different compartments - there's the broader community. And then there's water license holders specifically. It has waned in relation to the water management side

of things. It's been a little bit up and down. And you can see correlations of that when policy programs like water buybacks occur and there's a resentment across the community, then the confidence in the water managers drop at those points, or when legislative changes are made - they don't particularly think are helpful. You can see that reflected in the sentiment results as well. So, you've got to look at it a lot across a longer-term average.

But, shifting the needle -yes, we have shifted the needle a little. There's still a long way to go. There's lots of things outside our control that we can't influence or impact on shifting that needle.

We have to play a bigger role to influence and, inspire better performance, which will hopefully shift that needle. And the critical part of why the confidence is down is there's a massive gap in fundamental knowledge and education about the Basin, and how it works and who does what and why. As we're in field days, and our first one we went to was at Henty, you know, right from then and we were surveying this while we were out there. A lot of people with water licenses don't even realise they're in the Murray-Darling Basin. They don't understand the impact of the plan on them or what their role is. So, there's massive gap there that for a decade or more, the education about the plan from the responsible agencies, I don't think has been good enough. There's a bit of a void there that I think that we have to play a role in, in some regard to boost that fundamental education. Because if there's a big knowledge gap there, it's very hard to continually build trust and confidence on new stuff coming in and reviews, and keeping with the contemporary information if they don't understand the fundamentals.

So, whilst it's not a functional legislative role we need to play, I think there's an obligation on me, and the office more broadly, to independently play a bit of an education role and most importantly, encourage the agencies responsible to lift their game in that regard. And that's certainly going to be a focus for the next four years.

V2: If you like this episode of Water's Edge, make sure you 'like' or 'follow' us so you don't miss our next episode. You can find and connect with our other social media channels, including previous episodes of Water's Edge by visiting [igwc.gov.au](http://igwc.gov.au).

AP: Take us back to when you started versus where the office supporting you is now. Is it vastly different in size, skills, and capability?

TG: Without question. Certainly, we were a fledgling organisation when we started. And as I referred to earlier, no one really wanted us to be there. So, we didn't get the easiest ride or when we were trying to establish ourselves and had overcome some obstacles. And that's all understandable and natural. You know, people don't want you in their backyard or they want to be subject to oversight or scrutiny, it's an uncomfortable position to be in. You know, we soldiered on.

So, we started with about 24. For us, we were doing the best with what we had with for those first couple of years, but it was really the budget enhancement that Minister Plibersek was secured for us. That really changed the game for us. It gave us the ability to actually inquire. We had the power from day one, but we didn't have the resourcing from day one.

And secondly, it's, given us the power, sorry, the capability rather than power, to better communicate with the community about our work and make sure our work is having the impact that it needs to have. So, that budget enhancement, it was a change. Followed our review where it was obvious that we were critical in the success of the Basin Plan to play the role, but we need to be resourced properly.

Having our own legal counsel was a big part of that inquiry function. But having a full executive, rather than trying to run an organisation and do a thousand things with just, three of us was just not feasible, reasonable, you know. So, we have, have a properly full executive now. So, we've grown from 24 to, headcount of about 75 now because of those budget enhancements, which allows us to be full steam ahead now and be able to perform all our functions.



Our office design is sort of changed a little bit, given those nuances and the type of people and roles that we've recruited has changed a little bit. That'll always evolve as the challenges keep coming forward, and we have to be nimble in that regard. And I think we have been nimble over the last four-years. So, but I don't say the organisation needs to be any bigger than it is now. I think we just need to, be really effective with what we have. We still are a small organisation in comparison to a lot, but we punch above our weight. I think in the impact potential we have is pretty significant to shifting the dial on trust and confidence. If we can pull it off.

AP: You built the office and capabilities from the ground up. So, what have been some of the leadership lessons you've learned or applied from your own leadership experience when building the IWC?

TG: Well, the greatest lessons I've learned in any leadership role I've had over the years, Andrew is the first thing - if you recognise you're not the smartest person in the room and know it all, all the font of all knowledge, then you're one step ahead. So, what I've been, very deliberate in doing is surrounding myself with very talented, very capable, and a lot of people who are smarter than me. And, I have a wonderful Deputy Inspector-General whose contribution to our office has been immense. A wonderful leader in his own right. And his capability is second to none. And his work with me and others who, are no longer with us and who had just come on board recently, I think has shaped us into a very capable organisation. We now have a branch structure; proper executive. We have all the systems in place to hold ourselves to equal account as we need to be. So, I think the leadership lessons is, you know, getting the right team around you and then inspiring them on a shared vision and, bringing the team along with you. It's what we have to do internally, and it's what we have to do externally as well.

And I think it's a failing of some of the water managers out there is, whilst the work they're doing is meritorious and good, they don't necessarily always take people with them. And what the community out there always want to know, and it's politicians fail at this the most, is when they do something they never explain why. And even if people don't like it, as long as they understand 'why', they're going to not dislike it as much if they understand why. So, what we do, why we're doing it, is, is the most important thing in it all. And I think that's a lesson in any leadership role. And I think for other water leaders in water management, that's something that they can improve on is the 'why' factor. The work they're doing is all good work. And it's just hidden so hard to find. It's not transparent. It's tucked away in drop down boxes on websites. And it's just not fully transparent. And they all have an obligation. I think the community deserve easy access of information when, you know, they charged with, managing a critical resource for our nation with significant public spend in it. There's an obligation, so we tried to play a role with that - our latest website, I think, is leading the way in the simplicity of accessing information, which is important. So, that was a key lesson from day one as well. That was important to give easy access to information as well. And there's still some work to do. And along with education, and transparency, I think that's another couple of key areas of focus for the next four-years.

AP: In regard to the overall success of the Basin, what's keeping you up at night? I mean, the things that concern you the most about the Basin?

TG: It probably two things. Is that there's a lot of good outcomes and positive stories out there that aren't getting told. Unless they are articulated, unless they're understood and trusted, our ability to raise trust and confidence is going to be compromised. It's not our functional role or responsibility to do that. But again, I see that we have an obligation - not just as integrity body, but also a bit of a moral obligation, if there's a void there, then if we have a capability that we can independently help fill that void... we don't take on the ownership of educating the community. But, we can play a role in it. It's not our job to go out and promote all the good outcomes from every agency who's responsible for Basin Plan implementation out there. But I guess if they're struggling to be heard or believed in, if they're putting material out there, then we can play a third-party endorsement role that if we go out an assessment and say, yeah, this is a good outcome,

then if people have trust in us, then that's only going to lift their trust and confidence in actual outcomes that just aren't well known, aren't appreciated.

There's been some tremendously good work done over the decade or plus years the Basin Plan has been in place, but it's been a lot of areas that are ripe for improvement too. And that's where our major focus has to be. And that's where the large part of our work is.

So, in the same vein as a bit of a segue, what's keeping me up at night now is the review of the Basin Plan. It, and this is not a derogatory statement in regards to the work being undertaken by the MDBA, and I have a good relationship with the CEO and we are engaged, in the review process. And, you know, we're not engaged in parts that we don't have the expertise, we're not in the climate change component of it or that or some of the specialist areas that are not within our capability, but we are involved in the areas that we have input into.

What keeps me up at night is I'm just hoping that it's not Groundhog Day where we're listened to, but we're not heard. The important things that we're contributing to the review are not adopted or are passed over, or for expediency purposes or other outside influences, aren't adopted. And we move to, you know, a new form of the Basin Plan that has the same fundamental errors or design flaws in it.

The reality is that to get the Basin Plan outcomes they're after, you can either recover all the water, or you can put in complementary measures to use the water more efficiently and direct it where it needs to go. The water recovery component comes with some tough components to it. There's a lot of community pushback against it, a lot of angst and a lot of risk on a social/economic fallout component. It's very expensive as well. Complementary measures, you know, there's a lot of merit in them, but they haven't been implemented very well. They've been project managed terribly. There's been no assurance processes around it. There's been no transparency around those processes. And unless that's properly built into the design of Basin Plan 2.0 and the regulatory standards are still there, if they're diluted, that's a concern. We don't want to see that.

Then we need - the biggest issue that's not in the current Basin Plan and legislation associated arrangements is enough accountability and clarity of roles. That needs to be clear. Clear as crystal. Who's responsible for what? And if it's not done, who's accountable? Because everyone wants to be in charge or influence and stuff. But when things go bad, no one wants to be accountable for it. And that's a natural thing, you know, shifting risk and avoiding accountability. You know, it's an uncomfortable position. But with the size of the spend and the importance of the issue, that can't be absent from the new design of Basin Plan 2.0 or whatever format the governments decide to adopt, potentially adopt, and whatever is designed.

So, that's keeping me up at night to make sure that those things aren't missing or are properly adopted. And I'll be all over that, like calamine lotion until that's completed, I can tell you. And I'm in constant communication with Andrew McConville and his team over that. And I know he's aware of my sentiment. And I think, you know, the ministers have always relied on me, I've had three ministers in this role, and they've always trusted me to call it out and say what's needed to be said when it said. And I try and do that professionally and respectfully, but courage of my convictions, if there's something to be said, I'll always say it. That doesn't change for my second tenure. If anything, I might be prepared to say more.

AP: And what have you heard from the community about the Basin that's keeping them up at night?

TG: Yeah, it's, referred to a little bit. It's about the lack of accountability for water managers. They're worried about surety of supply as well. They get really concerned when the goalposts keep changing. So, you know, the old buy back ones there from day one, that that's just part of it. We're not involved in that process. That's not part of our remit. And that's a matter for government to do. But the way they do it is certainly part of our oversight remit to make sure it's lawful and ethical.

And yeah, I think that's the main thing is what's keeping people up at night is they need to get the trust in the water managers higher than it currently is, and us getting them to do their job better, I think contributes to that. And when they are doing a good job - us to recognise that is also important part of it as well. And I'm happy to call out when things are wrong and things need to improve. But I have an equal responsibility to acknowledge when things are done well and done properly. And I'm very happy to do that and have done that in the first four-years and will continue on that vein.

AP: The role of the Inspector-General of Water Compliance came about after one of the worst droughts in Australia's history post-European settlement. Now that drought broke in 2020 and in the main, it's been consecutive wet years in most parts of the Basin since. Should communities be thinking about the next drought notwithstanding, you were in the Basin in June, visiting communities experiencing prolonged dry conditions.

TG: Without doubt. No one should ever be complacent about drought and its impacts. And the preparedness required. We are, we're preparing for drought ourselves as a regulatory oversight integrity body, and we have a very small role to play, but we're very clear on what we need to do and where our efforts need to be focused. With the advent of drought that mostly sits with the state jurisdictions. But we're very clear on what we need to do.

If you're complacent about drought, then you just asking for trouble. It's not a matter of 'if', it's a matter of 'when'. And it's a matter of the severity as well. We'll obviously hope that doesn't come to that. Having seen recently, the perilous conditions people are in, in a part of South Australia, it's a stark reminder, how quickly it can change. And even in New South Wales, we've had the experience, significant floods and biblical rains in some parts of the eastern seaboard there. And people's minds wouldn't be remotely thinking about drought. But even parts of New South Wales are experiencing significant drying conditions right now. So, it's amazing the diversity of the landscape of the Murray-Darling Basin across a million square kilometres of it.

So, absolutely - no complacency from us, nor should there be from any one about drought preparedness. And that's when, in all reality, a severe drought hits. That's when the biggest opportunity for reform or change occurs. So, we've also got to be ready for that because there some big gaps in the arrangements that we have; the design of the plan. If drought brings on the crisis - and with crisis were create it out of, you say, the drought, but also the 'Pumped' maladministration in New South Wales - we've got to be ready to take advantage of that to make sure that the plan is best designed as it can be. Is improved on as best it can be, and it can have the impact on the outcomes and implementation of the plan as well.

So, we're ready for that as well. Hopefully it doesn't come on, from a human cost, human impact, point of view, but it's just realistically inevitable at some stage, so everyone's got to be ready and prepared as best we can. And I can assure everyone, we are prepared.

AP: And for our last question, what does legacy mean to you? And do you have a desire to leave one for your time that you've been Inspector-General?

TG: Yeah, look, I think I might have mentioned earlier, but I don't look at legacy through an individual lens. It's not about me. It's always about 'we' in the office. So, I know my deputy shares a very specific view in relation to our office's capability and functionality, and that's part of the legacy he wants to have. Mine is about having the biggest impact I can in the time I have left. And I haven't bought myself a countdown clock yet, but I have limited time left in this role to have the impact that I'd like to see it get the improvements in water management for the Murray-Darling Basin. But I can't do that without Daniel's legacy of having an office fit for purpose and functioning and really capable.

But I also can't do that unless the whole team have bought in. Their view of their legacy is part of what we're doing. So, it's not a 'me' legacy, it's a 'we' legacy. We're starting that process very soon. Our new strategic plan, our values and our objectives are not



going to change that much about ensuring things are lawful and transparent and, can be done better and making them be done better. They're going to probably stay the same, but it's about what other things are going to make that happen. And we've got a very diverse views across our offices and inputs that can really contribute to that being something special. So, we'll go through that process.

And the legacy in, in all honesty, won't be something you could measure or see while I'm still here. The legacy will be, how good did 'we' set it up for the second and third Inspector-General, so they can build on whatever challenges that will pivot, and they'll need to address. That they've got that capability and the work's been done, and the hard lifting has been done, so we won't necessarily realise the benefits of the work we're doing now, but others will in the future. And for me, that's the true definition of a legacy. It's not about 'me', it's about 'we', and it's about those who benefit from it to do more good into the future.

- V1: The independent Inspector-General of Water Compliance is a statutory officeholder with oversight, monitoring, regulatory functions and powers established under the *Water Act 2007*. For more information on what we do, visit our website - [igwc.gov.au](http://igwc.gov.au).
- V2: Water's Edge is produced by the independent Inspector-General of Water Compliance, Australian Government, Canberra.

**END OF TRANSCRIPT**