

# Interview with Richard Beasley

By Gail Furness SC



**Gail Furness (GF):** *Richard, you've written five novels to date?*

**Richard Beasley (RB):** A sixth is out next year. Or in 2025. I have a three book deal, and I've only delivered Simon & Schuster two. I'm two years late with the third. They haven't complained. It's possible they've forgotten.

**GF:** *So, you have now decided to branch into non-fiction with Dead in the Water, being published by Allen & Unwin in March 2020. How did that happen?*

**RB:** I had lunch with Quentin Dempster, who was a top journalist with the ABC, and

he suggested I write a book about what I know about 'water politics' and the Murray Darling Basin Plan based on the Royal Commission into it. I said 'No, I don't think so'. He then took me to lunch with Richard Walsh who worked for many years running Kerry Packer's magazine empire [and back in the '60s Oz Magazine] and who's now a consultant editor at Allen & Unwin. He was very keen for me to do it. Then A&U offered me a fortune as an advance, which is now hidden in a shelf company in the Cayman Islands, which ironically is where most companies that own lots of water in Australia are registered.



Richard Beasley holding a photo of Barnaby Joyce MP

**GF:** So tell us what it was that they wanted you to write about Richard?

**RB:** 'Maladministration', 'gross negligence', and 'incomprehensible decision making', all of which are findings straight out of Walker's Royal Commission report into the Basin Plan. There were a lot of much stronger words he used, but I edited them out.

**GF:** Richard you were Senior Counsel Assisting that Royal Commission and for full disclosure, I represented the State of New South Wales before that Royal Commission.

**RB:** New South Wales hasn't covered itself in glory when it comes to water if your perspective is the national interest.

**GF:** Now tell me, did you feel any compunction about writing a book that the source material came from your professional work as a barrister?

**RB:** None. What I'm writing about is all from the public record, publicly released reports, talks with experts from a huge variety of fields, and the Commission's findings. And it is not well understood, but should be because it's so important. There is a real need to explain this \$13 billion environmental debacle in a less formal way than a Royal Commission report

**GF:** Was the source of your material the public transcripts of the Royal Commission?

**RB:** Partly. There's also a huge amount of publicly available expert material. I had opportunities to speak to experts in almost every scientific field you could think of – not just ecology and hydrology, but in climate change and water economics. Then there were the medical experts and philosophers who have expertise in why people vote for the National Party. I've also included a chapter on the text message reports of the 'Drought Envoy' – Barnaby Joyce, which have been leaked to me. I expect to win a Walkley.

**GF:** Does your publisher have concerns about defamation?

**RB:** My publisher's defamation Senior Counsel, Richard Potter, has worked on nothing but my manuscript for a year. There will be a sealed section available in the third

reprint. This will include photos I took at National Party fundraisers I attended under-cover while doing the Commission.

**GF:** It was an unusual Royal Commission in that none of the States or the Commonwealth sought leave to appear.

**RB:** The Commonwealth – disgracefully in my opinion – challenged the summonses Bret issued seeking to compel commonwealth witnesses and documents, alleging that his actions were an interference with the Commonwealth's capacity to function as a government. This presupposes that they need assistance from him to not be able to function properly as a government, which may or may not be a big call. It was a Melbourne Corporation type argument.

**GF:** Why was that disgraceful?

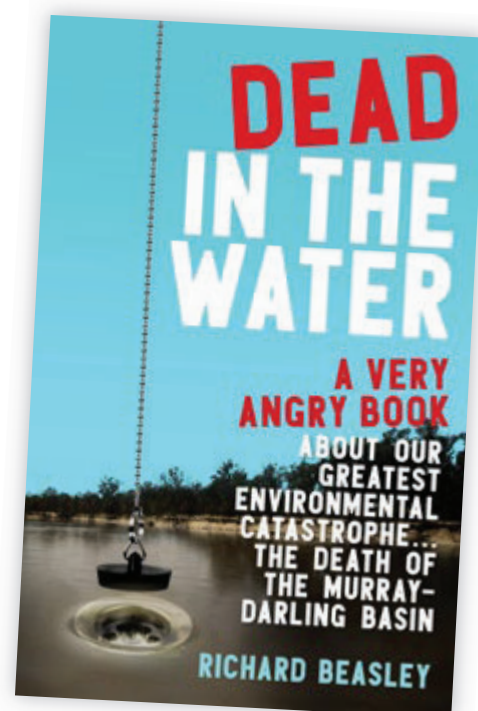
**RB:** The Basin Plan is a commonwealth statutory instrument, but also an inter-governmental agreement between the Commonwealth, New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria, South Australia, and the ACT. One of the State parties to that agreement claimed it was beset with very serious problems – so serious they meant the Plan was invalid. The Commonwealth, as a responsible government, should have gone, 'Okay, this is the most important environmental agreement and law Australia has. We better look into whether South Australia has got a point.' Instead they just said 'Nah, not cooperating. See you in the High Court'. How's that for a great example of cooperative federalism?

**GF:** But the States and the ACT didn't cooperate either. So, it is not just a Commonwealth issue.

**RB:** Not every party to the Basin Plan seems upset it is hopelessly unlawful. I don't think they want it drafted the way the Water Act says it must be – as an environment first law, as distinct from a big irrigators first law, a mining companies second law, and a Murray Cod last law.

**GF:** Tell me, have you received any briefs from the Commonwealth since that report has come out.

**RB:** I hadn't before, but the Hon Michael McCormack, the Deputy PM, is rumoured



to be considering making me the honorary Consigliere to the National Party. They haven't had one since Slim Dusty, so it would be quite an honour.

**GF:** I heard your interview with Fran Kelly on Radio National soon after the report came out and you were very vocal in your criticism of a number of people including Barnaby Joyce.

**RB:** In response to a question from Richard Ackland for *Justinian*, 'What would you have as your last meal?' – I said I'd have Barnaby Joyce's testicles. That ended up putting me on the front page of *The Australian*. Can you imagine getting a front page for saying you want to eat a bloke's balls? I was joking, but if I actually did eat Barnaby's genitals, I think we are getting into Australian of the Year or Nobel territory.

**GF:** So tell me Richard, it seems to me that you court, deliberately or otherwise, controversy.

**RB:** I've learnt that it's impossible to have a low profile if you do an interview and mention eating a politician's testicles. Unless I'd said that I'd wanted to eat Anthony Albanese's testicles. In which case, I would be *The Australian* newspaper's Australian of the Year 2020. **BN**