

Attention Mr Tony Windsor

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THE FUTURE USE OF AUSTRALIA'S WATER

In the face of increasing population pressure on this country and its limited resources, the ethic of water use and the position of water as a resource, key as it is to the physical and financial structure of our society, should be seen as an invaluable premium rather than as a thing to be taken for granted, misused as by divine right. If our civilization is perceived as an arch, water is the key stone in that arch.

On a local level communities solely reliant on an agricultural base would, were their source of water reduced or cut off by natural or deliberate human agency, collapse like a house of cards. Their farming support would decline or fail, the infrastructure reliant on this base would cave in and the wider community so affected would collapse altogether. However future water policy is to be determined, there will be foreseeable consequences from any decision made. As the issue of water use must be tackled, negative consequences are unavoidable. How little damage to communities or how much must enter the equation of such policy, the most humane and sensitive approach preferable. Where future water policy will erode the status of such communities, the welfare of the people affected should be considered and the damage from policies adverse to them kept to a minimum where possible.

The management of water should be on a wider and more pervasive scale than the current piecemeal state approach. This means the establishment of a unifying Federal body empowered to bring together a central form of control which can direct the nationwide use of water under which individual states must defer and in the context of which formulate their several policies of use and distribution. The main aims of this approach are to maximize use of an increasingly limited resource societally and commercially and the steady sustaining of this resource through technologies and policies designed ensure supply.

I believe our cavalier disregard, waste, rising salinity and ineffective, piecemeal control have brought us to the point of requiring firmer, co-ordinated control. Whether we have bounty years of rainfall or not, we can no longer afford to watch the weather, wait and carry on as we are used to. Our "she'll be right" attitude and waste have necessitated even stricter individual and collective control of water use in corporate, government and private sectors. Short of a control economy (which future population pressure may require), any such policy should be a carrot and stick approach, being a combination of government regulation and incentives, vis-a-vis obtaining or proposed bonuses or concessions for water tanks on new homes or established ones, promoting sale and use of water-saving white goods and equal. Water rationing will most likely come in to any future policy, but gray water recycling should definitely be considered to mitigate the impact of such rationing. Thus a mix of public and private supply should be factored in to any future considerations, including gray water in future agricultural use.

We will, I believe, have to reconsider our traditional irrigation schemes where water is seen as a monitored yet disposable resource. Because of increasing population, diminishing supply, unreliable seasons, increasing salinity, every stratagem and technology must be explored and exploited – enclosed irrigation channels to combat evaporation, as Mr Brumby proposed, use of gray water, rainwater and storm water, effective water timers, efficient Karcher-type hose and connector fittings, Israeli and other irrigation technologies from "best world's practice" elsewhere, including aeroponics and hydroponics. Pioneering water strategies are also being undertaken in Western Victoria and elsewhere under the auspices of farsighted farmers and CSIRO. The ABC's TV series "Landline" has archival histories of such projects which may be consulted via the series producer Kerrie Lonergan. What I am suggesting (ground cover to combat salinity included) is an integrated revolutionary approach.

Water-using industries (breweries, carwash operations and other such industries) must be brought under future control and the production of water-using appliances should be brought into line with the conservative use of

water. As supply becomes more critical, the use of such features as fountains and swimming pools will come into the equation of social necessity versus traditional freedom.

Currently the vitality of the rivers is in focus. While this ecological issue is important, can we solve the problem of river volume at the expense of supply before we have addressed the overall problem of water infrastructure? Short of addressing the issues of water contamination and pollution to ensure quality of supply, can we try and have our cake and eat it in indulging in water flushing when the problems of supply and infrastructure remain unanswered? Hard as this may sound, is not riverine renovation a lesser priority until such time as it can be addressed? Where possible the preservation of aquatic native species should be pursued but not at the total deviation away from dedicated pursuit of doing everything possible to establish our water future.

Until desalination and future strategies come onstream, industry and agriculture must rely on traditional water sources. The deterioration of these sources must be arrested and renovation to health done where possible. Increased flow and beautification of these sources (rivers, creeks, lakes, etc.) I feel must come later when the pressure of their use is relieved by desalination and other alternative strategies. Then they should be put back to natural quality as soon as can be done. Now I feel we must choose between sensible utility and heritage. I believe we must get our rivers back when this can be accomplished.

Hopefully aeroponics, hydroponics and improved micro-drip technologies for irrigation will reduce the demand on our waterways by agriculture and industry. Likewise water tanks and wider recycling technology will account for diminished residential demand on traditional sources of supply.

We are, I feel, in a transitional phase where traditional concepts must yield to new concepts embracing new technologies for the preservation of our nation's standard of living if not its survival. We can stay with an increasingly stressed infrastructure with horse-and-buggy responses, as governments of all stripes have done, or we can address the increasing challenges and seek strategies to maximise and conserve a precious resource. Through innovation, via a central point with a central focus, we must tackle what is a nationwide problem embedded in a world problem, the solution of which must begin with each nation and all. For our part, I feel we should incorporate all specialisms, particularly world climate experts, as vital resources of consultation. Left to themselves, such experts hive off to a conference in isolation and preach to the converted. Whatever we venture must be a united effort to include those on the front line of the problem, the farmers and graziers themselves.

From Eugene B. Harris