



"The Big Water Debate"

Thursday 11th February 2009

Allan Scott Auditorium, [UniSA City West campus](#),

Professor Ian Lowe "The truth and lies about water politics"

The Big Water Debate

Keynote address by Professor Ian Lowe, President of the Australian Conservation Foundation:

"The truth and lies about water politics"

Abstract:

Highly respected Professor Ian Lowe, President of the Australian Conservation Foundation will commence proceedings with his address: "The Truth & Lies About Water Politics".

Water is essential for life. Discussion of water needs to take account of some fundamental truths: South Australia is the driest State of the driest inhabited continent. We also have more variable rainfall than other continents. Both rainfall patterns and subsequent run-off are being altered significantly by climate change. The lower Murray is now in a crisis state as a result of over-extraction of water upstream. People understand these truths and expect serious discussion of water issues in the run-up to the State election.

The water is muddied by some frequently-repeated lies: the Murray is in crisis because of Adelaide's water use, irrigation water is used efficiently to maximise economic benefits, we are doing all that is reasonable to manage demand and to harvest storm-water, we need desalination and its impacts are minor, privatisation of water is beneficial, all the problems would be solved if the issue was taken over by the Commonwealth government, climate change is not a serious threat. There are also some half-truths: other States are to blame, there is now an effective plan to manage the Murray-Darling system.

Speakers Notes:

There are some obvious truths:

- South Australia is the driest State of the driest inhabited continent
- Australia is not just the driest, also has greatest variability of rainfall and run-off
- The lower Murray and the Coorong are in acute distress
- Climate change has been worsening the situation for decades
- Despite campaigns of misinformation, the community understands the problem.
- There are some claims that are clearly untrue:
- Irrigation water is used efficiently to maximise economic benefits





"The Big Water Debate"

Thursday 11th February 2009

Allan Scott Auditorium, [UniSA City West campus](#),

Professor Ian Lowe "The truth and lies about water politics"

- We are doing all we reasonably can to harvest rain-water run-off
- We are doing all we reasonably can to manage demand for water
- The lower Murray and the Coorong are in crisis because of Adelaide's demands
- A "regulator" is not a dam [and a wall with a road and trees is "temporary"]
- Privatisation has paid off [and hence should be extended]
- De-salination is necessary and would do no real harm
- The science of climate change is so uncertain we don't need to take urgent action
- Problems would all be solved by a Canberra takeover.

There are also some half-truths: other States are to blame for the state of the lower Murray, recent changes mean the problems are now under control.

We have known about the problems of the Murray-Darling system for many years. The 1996 national report on the state of the environment revealed that the allowed extraction of water, mainly for irrigation, is 80 per cent of the median natural flow. The catch of native fish like Murray cod has declined drastically, while measurements of phosphorus and nitrate are usually above the level for government intervention. The main cause is very inefficient use of irrigation water. Most irrigation water still flows through open channels in arid regions; most of the water that does reach the fields is not delivered efficiently to crops. Overall, much more water evaporates than is used by crops.

Economic yields from irrigation water range from about \$300 per megalitre for pasture and rice up to \$1500 for fruit and \$1800 for vegetables. But two-thirds of all water goes to dairy pasture and rice, the lowest-value applications. The amount of land irrigated for dairy is greater than the total sum of vegetables, fruit, tree-nuts, grapes, rice, sheep, hay, legumes and oil-seeds combined.

The situation is getting worse. Dr Richard Davis of Land and Water Australia estimated "vegetation change, increases in farm dams, increased groundwater use and climate change could reduce the flow in the river Murray by 2000 GL/year by 2025". The Living Murray initiative only seeks to return 500 GL/year to the river system. With bi-partisan agreement in Canberra for inadequate responses to the threat of climate change, there will need to be direct action to save the Coorong, Lower Lakes and Murray Mouth (CLLMM) Ramsar site, which must be a priority for permanent water entitlement allocation.





"The Big Water Debate"

Thursday 11th February 2009

Allan Scott Auditorium, [UniSA City West campus](#),

Professor Ian Lowe "The truth and lies about water politics"

The long-term future of the site can only be secured with more water which will be available in low-inflow years as well as wet years.

The SA government has acquired 170 GL of temporary water to buy some more time

A further 148 GL is allocated from the recent floods in the Darling Basin.

This is good but must be followed up by purchase of permanent water.

\$400 million should be used to buy permanent entitlements for the environment in SA, providing about 150GL of high-security water and making a significant state-based contribution to the long-term future of the CLLMM.

In terms of urban water use, the efficient use of water has to be the first, second and third priority. It is by far the most cost-effective way to get supply and demand back into balance. Rainwater harvesting and waste-water treatment are possible ways to augment supply if State and Commonwealth policies supporting mindless growth outstrip the gains made by demand management. Desalination should be seen as a technology of last resort, only acceptable if powered by renewable energy and if the resulting brine can be managed in an ecologically responsible way. Current proposals in South Australia [and some other States] fail that test.

Professor Ian Lowe AO is emeritus professor of science, technology and society at Griffith University in Brisbane, as well as being an adjunct professor at Sunshine Coast University and Flinders University.

Professor Lowe was made an Officer of the Order of Australia in 2001 for services to science and technology, especially in the area of environmental studies. In 2002 he was awarded a Centenary Medal for contributions to environmental science and won the Eureka Prize for promotion of science. His contributions have also been recognised by the Prime Minister's Environment Award for Outstanding Individual Achievement, the Queensland Premier's Millennium Award for Excellence in Science and the University of NSW Alumni Award for achievement in science. Professor Lowe is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering and was named Humanist of the Year in 1988.

Professor Lowe studied engineering and science at the University of NSW and earned his doctorate in physics from the University of York. He is the author or co-author of 10 Open University books, 10 other books, more than 50 book chapters and over 500 other publications or conference papers.





"The Big Water Debate"

Thursday 11th February 2009

Allan Scott Auditorium, [UniSA City West campus](#),

Professor Ian Lowe "The truth and lies about water politics"

Professor Lowe has been a referee for the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change, attended the Geneva and Kyoto conferences of the parties to the Framework Convention on Climate Change and was a member of the Australian delegation to the 1999 UNESCO World Conference on Science. He was on the steering group for the UNEP project Global Environmental Outlook, an invited participant in the 2000 workshop on Sustainability Science and a referee for both the International Geosphere-Biosphere Program's 2004 book on planetary science and the 2005 Millennium Assessment Report.

In 2004, Professor Lowe was elected ACF President. He has spent his time as head of ACF using his status as one of the world's foremost climate change scientists to promote awareness of climate change in Australia and the world. In 2009, Professor Lowe won the International Academy of Science's Konrad Lorenz Gold Medal carrying the title: 'Hope for the Future for a Sustainable World'.

Edited bio from ACF Website:

http://www.acfonline.org.au/articles/news.asp?news_id=486

About Water Action Coalition: WAC is a broadly based movement of community groups and environmental organisations seeking an informed and constructive debate on our water future. WAC seeks policies to secure a sustainable supply of water, without compromising the health of interdependent ecosystems, with the goal that these be implemented by the incoming SA Government and sustained by future governments for the benefit of all.

Jointly presented by the [Water Action Coalition](#) and [The Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre](#) of the University of South Australia.

