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SUPPLEMENTARY SUBMISSION NO. 134

Presentation to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Inquiry into future water supplies for Australia's rural industries and communities

Presentation between 10 and 10.45 am at the public hearing in the Brisbane Hilton's Victoria Room on 19 February 2003 by Lin M. Hall of 10 Cathryn Court, Cedar Grove Qld 4285.

Official attitudes

The National Competition Policy is wrong. But, it seems, nobody hereabouts knows how to do anything about it. The National Competition Council¹ (NCC) doesn't have any message for the public that tells us how it works. It doesn't try to tell us how to do anything to tell it that it has the wrong idea. I know that our local government doesn't know how to influence the NCC and other governments² need to tell it to change its ways.

Issuing absolutely dense reports full of unexplained acronyms that go on for pages and pages is not communicating with the public. Nor is having a web site with nothing useful to the public. This is what I see when I look at the NCC.

Beaudesert Shire Council has had difficulties with how the NCC works and how the State has set up management of local water resources. But nobody there knows how to communicate with either body in any effective way to have rural water resources managed properly.

Peter Beattie, Premier of Queensland, said on the ABC TV program *Landline* last Sunday³, "Unless we have sensible water management practices we will have large areas of Queensland unfarmable⁴." But he was meaning from too much irrigation!

Reality bites

A friend of mine recently moved to Bundaberg. He is a keen gardener and a DIY person. He decided to add a pergola to the back of his house and he wanted to put on a guttering and catch the rain in a tank so that he would have water for his garden. The council inspector wouldn't allow him to do that. All water from rooves would have to be plumbed into the storm water drain at the front of the house.

¹ See *How to argue with an economist*, Lindy Edwards published by Cambridge University Press, pages 66, 73-5

² Every level of government but especially local government needs to know how to influence the NCC to make changes

³ 16 February 2003 at 12 noon

⁴ Because of salination from overuse of water for surface irrigation

My friend asked why the water could not be collected. He was told that it was a city by-law to have all rainwater drained into the stormwater drain.

My friend asked where the inspector thought that the water went now. The inspector said that he didn't understand the question so my friend asked where the inspector thought that the rainwater was going whenever it had rained in that past. "Oh," said the inspector, "onto the lawn and garden."

Such is the problem with by-laws that have never been questioned since sewage and storm-water were first drained from households in the mid-19th century. How do you overcome such thinking?

Ask yourself, "Where does stormwater from cities go?" Does it mostly go into the sea?

Ask yourself why stormwater was not collected in 19th century cities. Was it because of the pollution of the atmosphere or the danger of contamination from higher up windows? Do people still throw the contents of their chamber pots out the window? Are there not adequate filters for city-collected rainwater available? Should the loss of rainwater in cities continue?

The commercial reality

In December 2002 the Beaudesert Shire Council found out that water that they were paying to have reserved for them had been sold by Sun Water⁵ to other users. I guess that Sun Water figured that no one would ever find out that they were selling the same water twice. But, just like APRA last year, they were caught out by circumstances, not by a prudential institute that didn't follow the rules but, in this case, by a drought that didn't replenish the reservoir in time to save Sun Water's reputation.

Sun Water then found that the river that they used to distribute *their* water, to the communities, needed half as much more water per day than they had thought. Therefore they now have six months supply left, not 12.

Dairy farmers in our area carefully manage their herds so that they can maintain a reasonable milk production around the year. That's what they are paid for.

How many elected representatives and public servants realise that once a cow's water ration is cut for a day its milk production reduces drastically and will not recover until after it has calved again—at least 10 months later? What does the farmer do to re-establish the rotation of calving to ensure an even supply of milk in the following years? Just think about how you would go about making cows get pregnant in rotation throughout the year from a new start. That is what many dairy farmers relying on Maroon dam⁶ face right now.

Does NCC policy consider that fact? Nothing I can discover on their web site gives me any confidence that they do. What is there in an economist's university training that

⁵ The State owned entity that manages water resources in our area.

⁶ The principal water source in a drought for the Logan River from which water is used for dairy farm irrigation.

teaches them to consider fecundity and pregnancy rotation of dairy animals? Nothing that I can determine.

Legislation bites

When you were considering the National Competition Policy I guess that you were thinking that you were doing a good thing. It was a wonderful idea driving citizens in Australia from a inward looking economy to a policy of considering the profit motive in every decision. It is a good idea but isn't forcing the adoption of a different economic model just as bad as having an outdated one? Isn't forcing a new model on everybody overkill? Did any of you think of the downside of doing that?

Did any of you think that this over-regulation of the economy in the opposite direction than the one it had run for 200 years might need some fine-tuning? Did you put good and practical fine-tuning provisions in place?

No. I don't think so. You didn't do it because your public servants didn't recommend that you should do it. I think that they didn't recommend it because they knew that expressing such doubts was not good for you. A Bill with such provisions would only lead to many Representatives asking questions! So you got a Bill that was simple and straight-forward and none of you asked any silly questions about it.

Reality now

If places like the cotton farm Cubby, in outback Queensland, cannot have water in drought years why can households in cities, or even households with rainwater tanks, have water from the mains? Why not restrict town-water supplies?

A small township like Canungra in your chairperson's (Mrs Kay Elson MP) electorate has been out of water for a period just before recent rain but it was still using 600 litres per family per day which is exactly the 120 litres per day that the average person⁷ needs to live comfortably.

Would not paying much more for town water ensure that cities save more? Does the price of electricity or gas remain stable in shortages? Why?

Is it a lack of foresight or a lack of ongoing care and attention that allows cities to live in plenty when the rural communities starve of a vital resource?

Communities all over Australia that are short of water are now suffering from that lack of care and attention or foresight. As elected representatives you should try asking more questions, even silly ones.

⁷ According to United Nations figures