

"Water Must Never be let out of Public Hands"

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Maude Barlow interviewed by John E. Caldecott on behalf of Australian Options Magazine

What have you uncovered about how well Australians and their governments are protecting water as part of their "commons heritage" during your recent visit to Australia in September 2008 and in particular the waters of the Murray Darling Basin?

I was very disappointed by the collective actions of governments to protect the water heritage of Australia. The land base is losing its water reserves very quickly and the solution seems to be a naive faith in the "miracle" of technology, such as re-cycling and desalination, to rescue the country from a dry future. While the Rudd government is certainly better than the Howard government, which basically denied there was a crisis, it is still not taking the kinds of actions needed to protect Australia's water future and nor are the state governments. (By the way my government here in Canada is not better!)

Do you think formal conservation and environmental movements are doing enough to alert and warn Australians of the real purpose of water reform, the privatisations of our rivers such as the Murray Darling Basin?

I think there are many wonderful local and state groups doing exceptional work to protect their local water systems. But there is a lack of coordinated national networking, strategy sharing and action. Recently several groups have come together to form the Australian Water Network and I urge all Australians to support this national effort.

[Wikipedia](#) attributes the application of American economic ideas such as the "Washington Consensus" promoted for crisis-wracked developing countries however you can't help thinking that Australian Governments over the last 30 years have allowed themselves to be conned into implementing the consensus when you recognise just how institutionalised the ten specific economic policy prescriptions are. Is the "Washington Consensus" the root-cause of the push to privatise water?

Most governments in the world bought into the Washington Consensus view of the economy and imposed it on their citizens. This included privatization of their public services (including water), deregulation of environmental, health and safety rules, and opening up their markets and essential services to foreign take-overs. The results have been disastrous for all but a handful of wealthy corporations but the impact on water has been especially profound.

The Rudd Labor Government is planning to use Private Public Partnerships (PPPs) to further develop infrastructure. You don't have to be a Rhodes Scholar to work out that paying for the profit margins and their debt will only lead to higher costs within the economy and reduced competitive position for producers producing goods and services. Has research been performed to understand the impact and performance of privatisation of water on society, the economy and the environment?

Public private partnerships have been tried and proven a failure in countries around the world. Even the World Bank and United Nations have admitted their failure in the global South and cities in the North, including Paris, that has had private water delivery for a hundred years, are rejecting private water services and returning to public, not-for-profit delivery.

The *Adelaide Advertiser* published an article of yours entitled "War on Water" on 3rd September 2008 which contains a rational national plan of action based on sound water management, public health and safety, and climate security in which you suggest "The Australian Government must approach its water crisis as it would a war". One of the most logical things to do is to focus water resources on meeting local needs first which is a key element of your plan. This is contrary to the Washington Consensus and the free trade fundamentalists. I don't know what you think but it seems to me that Emission's Trading is a distraction to real policy initiatives such as you propose that by focussing on local markets, you use fewer resources, reduce pollution and CO₂ emissions and produce a leaner society and economy. Why is it so hard for pro-growth governments to understand and implement this type of policy?

Local management and care of watersheds - protected by strong government legislation - is the antidote to poor government or corporate mismanagement of water. However, it is imperative that there are resources for local communities to protect their water; often decisions are sent down to the level that does not have the clout or funds for real water protection.

In the *Advertiser* article you state "The precautionary principle of ecosystem protection must take precedence over commercial demands on these waters." Why must this be so and can you expand on the precautionary principle?

The precautionary principle basically says "do no harm" and require proof of no harm before access to a resource is allowed. Commercial water takings have decimated water systems in Australia and around the world. The time has come to establish and enforce rules to protect our dwindling water supplies everywhere.

As you are no doubt aware, Australian Governments are working furiously to unbundled "water access licenses" into unbundled "water entitlements" or shares that can be traded on water markets. Victoria put a 4% cap on the water that can be traded out of its irrigation districts, *The Advertiser* 3rd September 2008 "Victorian water cap starving the Murray". "The ACF's healthy rivers campaigner Dr Arlene Buchan said it was time the Victorian Government gave irrigation businesses the choice to sell water entitlements back to the Murray." This article is an example of how the new water market is being established to apparently save the Murray when it is very obvious the contrary is true. What would you say to those who support the purchase of water to save the Murray Darling and what advice would you give?

Water markets are a terrible idea. They separate water from the very watersheds we need for survival and sell upward toward money, not need. They will also open up Australia's water resources to foreign investors. Water must be declared a public trust that belongs to all the people, the ecosystem and the future. If some people - especially farmers - need to be compensated for the loss of water rights, so be it but water must never be let out of public hands.

State Governments like SA and Victoria, supported by the Australian Government, and are embracing PPPs to build desalination plants (150 GL in Victoria and around 100 GL in Adelaide). There are many people with expert knowledge in the communities here that have serious concerns about the environmental impacts and costs however perhaps the most serious concern is the feeling that Governments have rushed to building desalination plants, and I might add the "North South Pipeline" to supply Murray Goulburn water to Melbourne (75

GL) in response to what looks like a once in a 100 years drought without doing their homework properly and fully investigate all options i.e. stormwater, rainwater, recycled water, ground water, new methods of applying lean principles to improve efficiencies and effectiveness and to keep costs as low as possible. What do you think of desalination as a solution to Australia's water problems?

My nightmare for Australia in 30 years is a parched land ringed by dozens of giant desalination plants on the coast, destroying local coral reefs and fishing grounds. While there is a place for small scale desalination, it is a mistake to put our faith in a technology that is energy intensive, very expensive and a major polluter.

If the Murray-Darling Basin was being correctly managed what would you expect to see, even in these times of drought as to the percentage use of water for; sustaining the ecology of the river system, domestic needs by food producers and industry and export needs by food producers and industry.

I cannot say the exact percentages for the Murray Darling - others have more specific expertise. but I do know that if we set up the right principles i.e. that enough water must be reserved for the healthy functioning of the system and that water is a public trust, the needs of nature, people, and local food production, will come way before commercial and export uses of that water.

The Australian 3rd September 2008 carried an article entitled "Murray diversion would kill \$1bn worth of crops" and included a photo of Coleambally farmer Ken Brain with the pretext "Family of six kids to feed" – what is the argument Australians should use if they are to win the war particularly when in the same edition "Brendan Nelson criticised for denying climate change" Asa Wahlquist reported that the "National Water Commission chairman Ken Matthews said this week there were no national guidelines for dealing with over-allocation. "Under current conditions, many significant water-dependent ecosystems are under threat," he said."

There is no painless answer to the water crisis in Australia or around the world. We are all going to have to change our lives. It is better to try to do it ahead of the crisis or we are then faced with reacting to a crisis with little time to adjust and few resources to help us. Quite simply, the human species has taken too much from nature and we must put some back before it is too late.

"Maude Barlow"

Maude Barlow is the National Chairperson of the Council of Canadians and Senior Advisor on Water to the United Nations, Canada's largest public advocacy organization, and the founder of the Blue Planet Project, working internationally for the right to water. She serves on the boards of the San Francisco-based International Forum on Globalization and Washington-based Food and Water Watch and is a Councillor with the Hamburg-based World Future Council. Maude is the recipient of seven honorary doctorates, the 2005/2006 Lannan Cultural Freedom Fellowship Award, the 2005 Right Livelihood Award (known as the "Alternative Nobel") for her global water justice work, and is the Citation of Lifetime Achievement winner of the 2008 Canadian Environment Awards.

She is also the best selling author or co-author of 16 books, including *Blue Gold*, *The Fight to Stop Corporate Theft of the World's Water* and the recently released *Blue Covenant: The Global Water Crisis and The Coming Battle for the Right to Water*.

Maude Barlow will be in Australia in April 2009 as the Key Note International Speaker for the 5th Annual Australian Water Summit

5th Annual Australian Water Summit

1st – 3rd April 2009

Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre – Darling Harbour

Adapting to Climate Change & Strategies for the Water Industry (Day 3)

"The 5th Annual Australian Water Summit 2009 being held on 1st – 3rd April 2009 at the Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre is a flagship forum for Australia's \$90 billion water industry. Over the past four years, this summit has attracted more than 250 senior-level attendees to each event, representing major water utilities, financiers, project planners, policy heads and industry leaders. The theme for the 5th Annual Australian Water Summit 2009 is "Sustainable Water Resources Management".

<http://www.acevents.com.au/water2009/>

Maude was in Australia in August / September 2008 to launch *Blue Covenant* published by Black Inc Publishing:

Blue Covenant

The Global Water Crisis and the Coming Battle for the Right to Water

By Maude Barlow

In the tradition of such classics as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and Al Gore's *Inconvenient Truth*, *Blue Covenant* addresses an environmental crisis that – together with global warming – poses one of the gravest threats to our survival. World-renowned activist and author Maude Barlow has been at the forefront of international water politics, and in this timely and important book she discusses the state of the world's water, how water companies are reaping vast profits from declining supplies, and how ordinary people from around the world have banded together to reclaim the public's right to clean water.

<http://www.blackincbooks.com/blinc/blackinc/index.php>

Blue Planet Project

<http://www.blueplanetproject.net/>

The Council of Canadians

<http://www.canadians.org/>

Parched: the politics of water

Peter Mares *ABC Radio National* – *National Interest* 23 January 2009

Featuring Maude Barlow, Gwynne Dyer, Dr Paul Sinclair and Professor John Quiggin

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/nationalinterest/stories/2009/2446612.htm>

The Freshwater Cartel

Maude Barlow 25 Jul 2008

The Global Water Crisis Private companies are making fundamental decisions about who has access to water and under what conditions

<http://newmatilda.com/2008/07/25/freshwater-cartel>