

To:  
The Secretary  
Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

From:

Reverend Iain Watt  
Phone 54886752  
199 Ballard Road, Imbil 4570  
Minister of Religion for Mary Valley Uniting Church/Blue Care Chaplain Gympie

Tuesday, 3 April 2007

Dear Sir/Madam,

**Re: Inquiry into Additional Water Supplies for South East Queensland - Traveston Crossing Dam Information**

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this letter is to provide information for the Senate Inquiry.

#### **Introduction.**

I very much appreciate the opportunity to share my impressions of the social impact the proposed Traveston Crossing Dam has had and tragically continues to have and if it proceeds may yet have. I believe others more able have shown that the proposed dam at Traveston Crossing is not technically feasible, economically viable nor environmentally sustainable. Accepting the above as a given, I endeavour to show it is neither socially acceptable or ethically justifiable.

As a pastor in the Mary Valley, who is used to the tears of people harassed through this ill conceived Beattie plan, it is great to see the wide support from people coming in which the Valley needs. The coalition fighting this dam is from all spheres, political and social, because it is clearly morally wrong – the only political manipulation happening is from Beattie and Bligh to Queenslanders. They have put forward a pack of lies as Barnaby Joyce has said. Individuals, businesses and lives have been shattered already by this inept and cowardly government process. The trauma will continue while the Premier continues this deceit. This is most certainly not a NIMBY reaction. Mary Valley residents have loved ones and friends in Brisbane and we do care about the water crisis. Their tragedy is magnified because there are more economical, environmental and socially acceptable solutions to the water crisis yet the government inexplicably is committed to this dam. Our community needs hope in stopping the travesty of justice to avoid a completely overwhelming outcome.

I believe to gauge any idea of the social impact this proposed dam will have you must get the overall picture of the cruel manner in which the whole distressing affair has been managed in the last twelve months. I will endeavour to do that from the perspective of a minister of religion living and working in the Mary Valley.

A shocking announcement.

27<sup>th</sup> April, 2006 does not quite sound like 9/11 but it has become the day which changed the Mary Valley forever. It will soon be a year since the Queensland Premier announced almost a thousand homes will have to be resumed for just one of the two new dams he's promised for the south east. Having just toured the Traveston district near Gympie, by helicopter he said, "it's the likely site of the megadam that will service the Sunshine Coast." Unbelief and shock were universal. It is no exaggeration to say this announcement had a traumatic effect on the people of the Mary Valley, an effect which, like a perpetual cyclone, continues to ravage the social fabric of this community. The details of the proposal have changed many times, but the destructive effect continues because the credibility of the state government has been shattered by their own inept implementation of this bizarre plan. People have struggled with the reality of this proposal all along because there was no warning, **absolutely no consultation** and local general knowledge that this is a very poor site for a large dam. This lack of appropriate respect for the rights of the people in this region is totally unacceptable in Australia.

Chaos.

The public service had no means of dealing with the community's questions regarding: timing of the proposed project; boundaries of the dam; and compensation plans. People ringing government help and information lines endured months of being put on hold, referred to another department or promises they would be contacted when information was available. When information did start trickling out it was conflicting and subject to revisions and admitted error. (Even at the writing of this submission, Anna Bligh is again apologizing for sending out invitations to a Kandanga public meeting for future planning after the meeting was held). To its credit the community quickly mobilized and formed the **Save the Mary River Coordinating Group**, which did a remarkable job in quelling panic and reminding the community of their rights, refuting the bullying tactics and fabrications of the Premier Peter Beattie. The anger in people was palpable, but thankfully it was being directed constructively into an ordered resistance that was summed up in the slogan "No Dam". Car bonnet signs appeared along the roads in the area, and landowners put signs on their gates and in their paddocks, one thing was certain in this area – there was strong solidarity to resist the undemocratic proposal of the government. The Gympie Times ran headlines for months regarding the dam and the confused government plans which kept the issue before people. This was not one bombshell but a long series of blasts.

Media Taunts

The premier promoted the dam as a personal project. He announced it in the month after cyclone Larry in Innisfail, where he was high profile, bringing order out of chaos. I mention this because it was hard not to see the premier as a one man fix it machine who was now tackling the looming water crisis single handed, and in a moment of apparent all-powerful delirium, he said "We will build this dam feasible or not" and "People power will not stop this". The height of Peter Beattie's hard heartedness were plainly evidenced on TV as when in parliament and challenged about the difficulty the test sites had in finding adequate rock for the dam foundations, he made a joke "Its not rocket science" then with a grin, "Its rock science!". This as children facing losing their homes look on. Should they assume they don't count?

The combination of lack of information and government media propaganda certainly had a stressful impact. A few had begun to question if the government's callous disregard to: process; truth; and the effect this had on people was intentional psychological warfare tactics.

#### Health Challenges.

Many personal stories are on the record in the media, where the claimed stress has had families sell and move to escape the unlivable conditions. I have supported many individuals and families in this regard. The most vulnerable have been those who were already dealing with health issues. Stress is known to exacerbate the illness and this seems to have been evident for many. Children have suffered from horrible dreams of water flooding their homes and had trouble concentrating in school. Some older folk have not been able to face the challenges and have withdrawn from regular activities remaining in a state of inertia. This has been widely noticed and caused compounded grief. It had been heart wrenching to see the distress this cruel process has caused families who believe their seniors will not survive a relocation should they be required for the dam. Some have lived here for five generations, some have moved here to retire peacefully. Of course this has effected not only the sick and vulnerable as men are shedding tears in the street (For an Australian male to do that that is a lot of stress). At one time people here have felt there was more concern about a clutch of turtles or a few fish and trees than them. Of course they are all very important, as how we care for nature ultimately indicates how well we care for humans. But this was not even encouraging because recently commissioned Paradise Dam on the Burnett, Bundaberg, is held up by the government as the model to follow. There they promise to hatch and release threatened species. Scientists say it is a bit like simulating life as the animals cannot sustain themselves naturally, so they die without reproducing. In reality a re-stocked zoo. Also replacement trees were planted but not watered, they died too. If this is the way now trendy nature has been treated, what hope do the humans have? (Not much in this area it seems.)

As a minister of religion I have conducted funerals for people whose loved ones are buried in the Kandanga cemetery. The proposal of the government includes the flooding of this cemetery; this has exacerbated the trauma for families considerably. Since the announcement grieving families have to decide whether to keep their families together in the Kandanga cemetery by burying a loved one there or choose to have the service at another "safer" cemetery. Families with children lost to drowning, buried in the cemetery, are among those who find the governments plan to build up the surface of the cemetery to above dam water level, and re-attach the headstones less than satisfactory.

#### Government Help – A One Stop Shop

In July 2006, a Taskforce was appointed by the government, belatedly recognizing the need to manage the unfolding crisis in the Mary Valley. Retired Major General Peter Arnison headed up the Community Futures Task Force, to "ameliorate" the situation, but by this stage the community was very cynical regarding what his "real brief" was.

The idea of putting the latest information from government departments dealing with the proposal in Kandanga, the heart of the dam site, was good. So was the idea of placing a Lifeline site for grief and financial counseling in Kandanga. The government insistence on them being in the one small building was a mistake. As Lifeline is an agency of the Uniting Church in Australia, my church, I had opportunity to work in with them and my observation is that locals were generally disassociating themselves from anything government, which largely included the services of Lifeline. General Arnison has not gained favour from the community by making incorrect statements in the media regarding "the growing acceptance" for the dam! He was seeing too few people, too late and even he could not get answers for people from the government. A series of 17 public "consultation" meetings were held by Scott Smith, where

more confusion resulted as people's painful questions were not answered. This revealed to the community how the government was making things up as they went along. Then they were told their questions could not be answered because they had been lost.

#### QWIPL

The formation of Queensland Water Infrastructure Pty Ltd, (QWIPL) who also operated from the One Stop Shop completed the somewhat dubious aggregation of helpers. Scott Smith who listened to people's misery in the 17 public meetings was now part of the company, QWIPL, charged with the duty of buying land and building the dam. I can certainly testify that QWIPL has bullied people into selling, however they are understandably unwilling to come forward because of fear of further harassment. Paying good money for land does not make what QWIPL is doing right, any more than dropping money onto someone after raping them makes the relationship a consensual one. If this is not insulting enough to the community, the Co-ordinator-Generals draft for the Terms of Reference for an Environmental Impact Statement, December 2006, referred its social and economic environment assessment responsibilities to the Community Futures Taskforce. It is inappropriate that this new role be handled by the Community Futures Task Force as this group has been responsible for both aggravating the community and avoided by the community.

#### Decline in Community Groups

Groups from schools, sports groups through to churches and seniors have reported decline in numbers due to families moving out of the area. This makes it harder for each group to survive. Shops have reported less trade. Businesses have closed and many struggle because of a decline or ceasing of work. The uncertainty has halted spending and long term development in many cases. The only business I know that reports growth is the real estate groups who have picked up the rentals of the houses vacated by people selling and leaving. The police and school principals have confirmed new arrivals have brought problems into the area.

#### Real Support

The Save the Mary River Coordinating Group quickly set up a support centre at the old Kandanga Co-op building. This became a drop-in point and a source of support and information for people affected by the announcement. It has been the focal point for many individuals who have needed somewhere to do something positive to resist an incredible onslaught to their Valley and way of life. Meetings are held there and politicians from all parties state and federal level have been there (except Labor I believe) to hear and support the local community. I have been involved supporting the community where possible and endeavouring to get our voice of protest heard outside our region. Some may question why a church would get involved, as we follow the meek one who said "Turn the other cheek". Correctly defined, meekness is not weakness, but controlled strength. This strength Jesus also used ably when required. Particularly, advocating for the voiceless in the temple system, he used a whip to evict corrupt officials who were abusing the rights of the common people. Our state leader, Reverend Dr David Pitman and our Social Responsibility and Justice Advocate, Heather den Houting, visited the Mary Valley in June last year. Reverend Pitman and Heather visited a range of farms and businesses and listened to people in a public forum as well. He has taken our message to the wider church leadership, made several press releases condemning the actions of the government and spoken to the premier on several occasions regarding the difficulties their plan to build a dam at Traveston Crossing is causing. (Find a press release of Reverend Pitman attached Appendix A) David is also submitting a report to this Inquiry. My colleague Reverend John Woodley, who joined our community this year, is also entering a submission. Our church is keen to see justice happen in this area.

This community has close links and many have been looking out for each other. To this end as an act of defiance to the dehumanizing attitude of the Beattie government the community has been knitting a woolen scarf "to wrap up, care for and save the Mary". Now measuring almost 370 metres, it could go across the Mary River at the dam site to shield the trees as a last resort. Who would dare rip up the threads of such a colorful display, representing the lives of so many who are entwined in the fabric of life around the Mary River? Have we hope?

Humour

All this strife has not affected the humour of people. Signs appeared like, "No Dam – my horses can't water ski." "Why Peter, What big teeth you have – all the better to lie through!"

Online we shared these,

**Rev Watt wrote:**

Joke: What's the difference between God and Peter Beattie?  
God does not think he is Peter Beattie.

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Jesus helps people, walks on water and turns it to wine himself.  
Beattie helps himself, walks on people and turns whines about water.

**Darren E wrote:**

But you have to admit there are similarities too:

God flooded the world because people did not worship him.  
Beattie wants to flood the Mary Valley because we did not vote for him.

God sacrificed his son to save our souls. Beattie would sacrifice anything to save his popularity.

Towards the end of the world, it is said God will unleash the **four** Horsemen of the **Apocalypse**: Famine, Pestilence, War and Death. Towards the end of his government, Beattie has unleashed Natural Resources Minister Palaszczuk (famine), Health Minister Robertson (pestilence), Police Minister Spence (war) and former Health Minister Nuttall (death).

## Conclusion

The thing that irks me most is that people may accept this. That this dirty deed is considered "just the way that it is."

We deserve better! Queenslanders, Australians, humans, I would also say people made in God's image deserve better.

Not only have the people been disrespected by our elected representatives (Surely they know it will not be a good dam anyway) but I am absolutely confident other submissions will adequately prove, if we must have a dam this is not the right location, this is also too high a cost, there are cheaper alternatives for water and the impact on the environment is totally untenable. Earlier I asked what hope do the humans have?

I trust this submission shows insight to the fact that the spirit in the Mary Valley people is strong, possibly more so because of the provocation of this un-Australian, inexcusable behaviour by one of our state governments. But if the people of the Mary Valley loose hope: in stopping this dam; stopping this behaviour by the Beattie government, the future for all of us will be worse than bleak, it will be a very sad day. It is worth protecting what remains and the results of letting this sort of travesty by a government continue unchecked do not bear thinking about. Please I ask in God's name, do what you can to save the beautiful Mary River and the hopes of the wonderful community living with it.

Reverends David Pitman, John Woodley and myself would be available to the Senate Inquiry to answer questions from the churches perspective.

Thankyou again for allowing the voice of the people to be heard.

Sincerely

Iain Watt

Minister Mary Valley Uniting Church.

## Appendix A

### **MODERATOR ON LABOR'S INTRACTABLE COMMITMENT TO THE MARY RIVER DAM**

BY JOURNEY  
Updated : 2006-06-12

[Print View](#)

*This is an unedited reflection by the Moderator of the Uniting Church Queensland Synod Rev Dr David Pitman after his visit to the Mary Valley last week.*



On June 8th-9th I visited the Mary Valley in order to gain a first-hand insight into the situation around which the current controversy is raging. During my visit I was accompanied by Heather den Houting, Synod Social Justice Advocate, the Rev David Fanning, Chairperson of the Presbytery of Mary Burnett, and local Uniting Church Minister, the Rev Iain Watt. I have returned from that visit with a heavy heart.

On the evening of the 8th, I met with about 60 people in the Imbil Uniting Church Hall and the following day visited the Mary Dam Information Centre set up at Kandanga, and several properties that will be inundated or become unusable if the dam project proceeds.

In all, about 850 homes and/or farming properties will be resumed to make way for the dam. However, that is only the beginning of the impact this project will have on the local community and beyond.

*Moderator of the Uniting Church Queensland Synod Rev Dr David Pitman*

Let me briefly summarise the issues as I now understand them.

For some time now, the Government has had on its agenda the construction of a new dam on Amamoor Creek and the raising of the existing dam at Borumba to increase its capacity. The land required for these projects has already been acquired and their implementation would have minimal impact on the community. While some people are opposed to any further dam construction, most of the residents in the Valley have long since adjusted to the possibility of these projects and are willing to accept them.

However, while the possibility of a dam at Traveston on the Mary River has been investigated and rejected on two previous occasions, there has been no hint that the Government was considering this option yet again. Consequently, the announcement regarding the construction of a mega dam at Traveston, coming as it did without prior knowledge or consultation, caused shock and dismay in the community.

It is not really possible to appreciate the depth of pain and trauma this announcement has caused without personal contact with those most directly affected. The Premier, whose public statements have been particularly insensitive and uncaring, did fly over the region a few weeks ago, but has chosen not to visit the area or meet with local residents.

Telephone "help-lines" that have been set up are a joke! People are being asked to put their concerns in writing and are waiting for up to three weeks for a response. Financial compensation is being promised but the emotional pain and distress being experienced remains ignored and unaddressed.

Some of these families have been on the land in this area for more than 100 years. Others have moved there just recently, expecting to spend the last years of their lives in peaceful retirement in a lovely rural environment. Business people face financial ruin. Unemployment will increase greatly as farms and businesses are forced to close.

Even if it was decided right now not to proceed with the dam the adverse impact on the community has already been very significant.

Now all of this has happened while the current process of investigation into the suitability of the site is still in its early stages. Notwithstanding the commitment by the Government to undertake thorough geological research, along with environmental and community impact studies, the Premier has repeatedly declared that the dam must and will be built! I would like the Premier to explain the basis on which he can commit to this project before any such significant investigation has taken place, and in the absence of any prior consultation with those most directly and adversely affected. I find his attitude and the intention both mystifying and irresponsible.

The human cost of this project, directly impacting on the lives and livelihoods of 850 families, but with a major impact on many more people in the region, is unacceptable, particularly given that there are a number of previously identified alternative strategies that could be implemented with minimal human disruption. There is no doubt in my mind that the actions of the Government to this point in time have been shameful, abusive and callous.

It is inevitable that there will also be a significant impact on the environment, representing a major risk not only to local flora and fauna but to the whole river valley. The Mary River contains a number of rare and threatened species, including the Mary River Cod, the Mary River Turtle and the Queensland Lungfish (which is sacred to the local Indigenous people). Previous commitments by the Government in relation to environmental protection and community consultation, incorporated into the Water Act 2000, have not only been ignored to date but will be violated if this dam proceeds.

A range of other adverse outcomes have been identified, including the potential impact on tourism and recreational fishing, and disruption to transport, communications and power supply.

There is now a significant body of opinion that seriously questions the construction of dams as an effective strategy for long-term water conservation and supply. I am not a geologist or an engineer, but there seems to be something incredibly foolhardy about building a very expensive dam in an area where the alluvial sand is not only very deep but notoriously unstable, where water flow, except in times of flood, is variable and uncertain, and with the expectation that the actual depth of water in the dam will be quite shallow yet will cover 76 sq/m of fertile and productive land. It is no wonder the local residents are bewildered and dismayed!

It is very apparent that opposition to this project is widespread and has brought together a variety of concerned groups and organisations, so creating a stronger a sense of community and common purpose.

The Uniting Church has a long history of commitment to the community. This stance is informed by a strong determination to stand alongside those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged and who need someone to be their advocate and speak on their behalf.

As a church we also have a clear understanding of the urgent need to protect and preserve the environment for the sake of the generations who will come after us.

I know that environmental issues are sometimes controversial and that finding the right balance between development and conservation can be very difficult. But I sense that in regard to the construction of a dam at Traveston, the human and environmental issues have come together in a special way and have unified the community, not divided it.

I personally feel a deep sense of outrage on behalf of the residents of the Mary Valley. They have been treated very badly by a Government that constantly declares that it "cares for people". There is no evidence of that here.

Regardless of the final outcome, a great injustice has been done. Our commitment as a church must be to challenge that injustice and to ensure that proper and sustained pastoral care is provided, both now and into the future. I intend to take further action in regard to both of those imperatives.

The Rev Iain Watt has been exercising a wonderful ministry in the Valley. He is well known and greatly respected. In the midst of this human crisis the demands on his time and energy have been considerable. Please pray for him, and the members of our congregations at Imbil and Amamoor, as they exercise a caring and supportive presence in the wider life of the community.



# Moderator damns government over Mary River



Rev Ian Watt (left) and the Moderator in conversation with a Mary Valley farmer. Photo by Heather den Houting

QUEENSLAND'S moderator Rev Dr David Pitman marched on the ALP Convention in Brisbane in early June with residents who will be displaced by the proposed Traveston Crossing dam in the Sunshine Coast Hinterland.

Dr Pitman had earlier met with affected residents in the Mary Valley and toured the central Mary Valley to meet local people and gain a more complete understanding of the issues.

Dr Pitman listened to the concerns and responded to the grief and anger of the people with a commitment to support them in every way possible.

"The treatment of the people in the Mary Valley by this government is shameful and unacceptable," he said.

Local Uniting Church minister Rev Ian Watt said that those who have lived in the area for generations are distraught and children are stirred up and anxious as they see their parents continually stressed.

"The people living in the area affected (and it is much, much wider than those in the dam footprint) were not consulted but told blankly by the Premier that this is a fait accompli," he said.

"This is not democratic process - this is abuse."

The Moderator described the government's behaviour as abusive and callous.

"I personally feel a deep sense of outrage on behalf of the residents of the Mary Valley.

"They have been treated very badly by a government that constantly declares that it 'cares for people'. There is no evidence of that here."

Dr Pitman told the rally, "I want you to know that there are a lot of people in the city who are with you.

"There are those of us who are willing to change our lifestyles so you don't have to lose yours.

"The Uniting Church will stand by you in your struggle."

The church's Social Justice Advocate Ms Heather den Houting who travelled to Imbil with the Moderator said the Uniting Church in Australia has clear environmental policies which cover the building of major water catchments and storage facilities.

"The church says that such disturbances should be determined in a democratically legitimate process, with respect for the rights of nature and only where the disturbance is not inordinate."

After a day and a half of consultations Dr Pitman concluded, "I am not a geologist or an engineer but there seems to be a significant body of opinion that seriously questions the construction of this particular dam in this area.

"I would like the Premier to explain the basis on which he can commit to this project before the investigation has concluded, and in the absence of any prior consultation with those most directly and adversely affected.

"I find his attitude and the intention both mystifying and irresponsible."

At the time *Journey* went to print the government was standing firm on the Traveston Crossing dam project.

Dr Pitman believes that the local residents and the Save the Mary River Committee are more than capable of arguing the environmental case against the government proposals.

"Our primary concern is for the people and the way they are being treated."

By Bruce Mullan