

# Waste Not Want Not

**It makes more sense to manage demand for water than to increase supply through desalination.**

South Australia is the driest state of the driest inhabited continent, so it's not surprising that water was a hot topic for the March state election. South Australia is at the bottom end of the Murray–Darling system, and the lower lakes and the Murray mouth are in desperate shape. Over-generous allocation of irrigation water and continuing inefficient use have been compounded by years of below-average rainfall. The National Party, which exists to support rural communities, is deep in denial about climate change, but that's another story.

Adelaide gets some of its drinking water from the Murray, which doesn't have a lot to spare these days. The rest comes from reservoirs in the hills, also affected by the declining rainfall predicted over 20 years ago by climate science.

A public discussion of water issues in February drew a full house to the University of South Australia's Hawke Centre. I kicked things off with a presentation about truth and lies in water politics, setting the scene before the politicians had their say.

My main point was that there are two ways of resolving an imbalance between supply and demand: increasing supply or reducing demand. Managing demand is far more cost-effective than increasing supply.

Without having made a serious effort to reduce demand, the SA government is spending an estimated \$1.8 billion on a desalination plant to increase supply. The Opposition's proposed solution is to harvest stormwater, but this became a political football when the government said that more research is needed to prove that the water can be treated to drinking standards.

Both sides are missing the point. As

the old saying goes, if you can't fill the sink because the water keeps running down the plughole, you don't need a bigger tap – you need a plug! The money being spent on desalination, or that would alternatively be spent on stormwater harvesting, would be much more effectively used to reduce demand.

An extreme example of bizarre practice is that we still use expensively purified drinking water to flush toilets! Future generations will find this difficult to believe. Faced with the prospect of running short of water, Brisbane reduced demand from about 300 litres per person per day to 120. Adelaide still uses over 200.

One reason that several states are considering desalination is the reduced rainfall and run-off caused by climate change. The second reason is that demand continues to increase as the population grows. The issue is finally getting some political attention.

For years, Australia has had an unusually high rate of growth. Politicians have actively encouraged this, seeing it in simplistic terms as good for the economy. Howard and Costello introduced financial incentives for women to have more children; Rudd and Swann have increased them. Costello encouraged us to reproduce by urging couples to have “one for the husband, one for the wife and one for the country”, while Rudd was equally facile with his statement that he believes in “a big Australia”. Howard increased immigration to unprecedented levels and allowed the expansion of low-level training courses as a back-door migration path. The Rudd government expanded immigration still further at a time when we struggle to find work for



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young Australians, but finally cracked down on the training racket.

The issue has been forced onto the political agenda by the increasing problems of Australian cities. There is a voter backlash as transport, water and power infrastructure struggle to keep pace with growing populations.

Federal MP Kelvin Thompson tapped into the public mood with speeches urging a goal of stabilising the population. The Queensland government held a population summit in Brisbane at the end of March, following community gatherings in various parts of the south-east corner of the State, while the Australian Davos Connection convened a 2-day meeting in Melbourne at the same time to consider sustainable cities.

It certainly makes sense to have the discussion. There are real questions about our capacity to supply services to a rapidly growing population. Serious analysis of the economic issues shows that an increasing population causes the overall size of the economy to grow, but wealth per capita might even decline.

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