

The dams are falling - Victoria and Watershed's desalination blues.

- Get real! Of course the dams levels are falling, and we need to do something about it!
 - almost nothing new has been done since the late 1970's when the Thomson dam was commenced
 - population has gone up by 40% in that time, and
 - we have changed the environment and the climate through wasteful and inefficient energy use.
- Our Government realized the problem a little late, in 2002, and started work on finding a solution. Some really good work was done, with the basis of a sustainable strategy being formulated before the last election.
- Unfortunately, after the election it all started to look a little difficult, especially after the 2006 spring rains failed. Premier Bracks and his Water Minister said we'd build the world's biggest RO desal plant and take water from the north instead. Soon after, they both resigned.
- Mr. Brumby was given the reigns of power and he appointed his friend Tim Holding as Water Minister. This was to be a "can do" government, and the "Water Plan" was going to showcase that attitude. Government said we would need every drop from the N-S pipeline and from the desal plant. They were doing the right thing and these projects would operate 24/7, 365 days a year.
- 'Your Water Your Say' said this was CRAZY! All the other options mentioned before the election would likely be swept aside. The new "Water Plan" would see dams overflowing in 2015 with expensive and environmentally unfriendly water within just a few years after the desal plant is operating.
- The State Government squashed YWYS after it tried to get some environmental scrutiny of the preliminary works now underway on a 500 acre site. They used QC's and a team of lawyers to sway the judge on the wording of one sentence, the case was thrown out, and to this day the State Government refuse to release that community group from court costs.
- Experts and academics said this plan was two to ten times more environmentally unfriendly than the alternatives.
- No said the Government;
 - the N-S pipe would benefit all
 - a 'Public Private Partnership' would provide a cost effective and state of the art desalination plant. They said companies, the likes of Veolia (who are also operating Connex) could build and run the plant, and get the money and their profits from increased water costs.
- We thought that wasn't such a great idea if the desal would run like the trains. We suspected the Government was just handing over our water infrastructure in order to avoid having to do the work themselves, to secure the extra water we need.
- The community and Your Water Your Say managed to convince the Government that an Environmental Effects Statement was needed. Unfortunately the Government wrote the rules for the study, excluded a comparison to the alternatives, the greenhouse implications and left any requirement to act on findings up to government. They appointed DSE (Department of Sustainability and Environment), an arm of government, to do the studies, providing no resources to the community, shire or the new group, 'Watershed Victoria' to allow decent scrutiny. The Panel to scrutinize and report on the studies was appointed by the Government. The report went to the Government's Planning Minister who then made a recommendation that it could go ahead. The study hadn't found any problems that couldn't be "minimized" if it was "practicable" to do so. (Now what does that mean?)

- The local community can't understand why their pristine area has to be the site for a desalination plant when virtually all others world wide are in industrial areas. The chosen site is less than a kilometer from a river estuary and floodplain, only a few kilometers from marine parks, within the Philip Island penguin's feeding grounds and a migratory route of threatened sharks and whales.
- During the study DSE provided an analysis which confirmed, that with a continuation of the current drought, increasing population and expected water use, the dams would indeed be overflowing in 2015 under the Government's 'Water Plan'. The Government doesn't seem fazed by this and now says the desal plant may need to be shut down at times. Companies like Veolia will no doubt find ways to write their contracts so they'll be paid even when they aren't supplying water. You can be sure they will have things tied up so that they won't lose out, it will be you and I who'll be paying. The Government have already said, water charges through the utilities will go up by \$500 per year for the average household, by the end of the first year of operation of the desal plant.
- Some would say that we now have to accept that water, like electricity and other essential services, have to cost more because the world is changing. We say that would be OK if it gave the best outcomes for our environment and our children's future.
 - the Government just won't discuss why recycling, which would reduce pollution going out to sea, isn't a better option. They are going to create another factory dumping more waste to sea (5,500 litres per second in fact) and use at least twice as much energy in the process.
 - they say new dams are not the solution any longer but won't say why even just capturing floods going down rivers near the Thomson dam can't be used.
 - they say we need a "rainfall independent" source of water. Well desalination is that, but so is recycling, we don't stop showering or shitting just because it isn't raining.
 - what about rainwater tanks and capturing stormwater. Every time it rains the water that falls on our roofs, roads and carparks could be captured. There's at least as much stormwater flows out into Port Philip Bay each year as Melbourne uses. Sure rain won't always find its way to our dams when it's hot and the soil is dry, but rain on our roofs and in our drains doesn't soak in. The larger part of this water can be captured and used, meaning we don't have to take so much from the dams.
 - Mr. Brumby says rainwater tanks would use more electricity than a desal plant to source the same amount of water but that's CRAZY! The tank suppliers say it only takes a few dollars a year to run the pump on a rainwater tank.
 - Mr. Brumby says he personally finds rainwater tanks awkward things. But others find they give them the freedom to water as they choose, and wonder why the Government can't offer decent incentives for those who want to do their bit to take less from our dams when water is scarce.
 - the Government says having the desal plant operating is equivalent to having a second fridge running in every house. And now after the EES study, the Government has admitted that it will take more energy than they said to run the desalination plant. That extra fridge, operating in every household, will need to be a big one!