



Sydney be dammed: why can't we debate the dam issue?

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Abstract

In this paper KPMG Partner Bernard Salt argues that it's time to discuss the option of building another dam to service Sydney's water needs over the next 30 years. In fact Salt questions why there has been no debate about the option of building new dams to service any Australian capital city in the last 25 years. Metropolitan Australia had a culture of profligacy in its water use throughout the second half of the 20th century; the emphasis during the 1990s and earlier on water conservation was the right and proper response at that time. However new water strategies released in Queensland (May 2005) and especially in New South Wales (October 2004) make no provision for even the consideration of a substantial new dam. It's time to debate the option of building new dams to service the expanding populations of our capital cities.

Background

Sydney has a history of extraordinary population growth. At federation both Sydney and Melbourne contained half a million people. One hundred years later and super city Sydney had opened a lead of 650,000 people over its southern rival.

But the rise of Sydney will not end there. Medium series projections by the Australian Bureau of Statistics place Sydney's population at 5.7 million by 2051. This represents net growth of 1.6 million over 50 years or a flat average of 32,000 per year.

In the Olympic year Sydney added 60,000 new residents although this quickly dropped to 34,000 four years later. But even if the current sluggish rate of growth were to continue, then Sydney's population will rise 39 per cent over half a century from a base of 4.1 million in 2001.

Sydney's water resources are now at 42 per cent. If we are all agreed that 42 per cent is about as low in reserves as any large city should safely operate at, then something needs to be done to unequivocally fix the water problem in our largest city.

On 18 October 2004 the New South Wales government announced a strategy to manage Sydney's water needs for the 25 years to 2030 (when the city will contain 5.4 million people). The new strategy involves several actions: syphoning water from the Shoalhaven River; tapping water lower down in the Warragamba Dam; and consideration of a desalination plant.

The strategy was announced with great fanfare. Premier Bob Carr travelled to the Warragamba Dam to make the announcement. The day following the strategy's release, the *Sydney Morning Herald* allocated much of the front page as well as all of page seven to in-depth reportage and analysis.

And this was followed by a series of follow-up stories throughout that week. The *Herald* allocated around 10,000 words (yes, I counted them) to this issue over six consecutive days. And rightly so. The future provision of a reliable source of water is an issue that very much affects the quality of life of Sydney residents for decades to come.

The dam blind spot

And yet despite all the coverage, the analysis and the expert commentary, there was but a single oblique reference to what I would have thought was the bleeding obvious: why don't we build another dam? The *Sydney Morning Herald* followed the official cue in not mentioning the 'd' word.

“This week the State Government announced more water would be pumped from the Shoalhaven, this time during high flow periods when the Tallowa dam is spilling. The plan is an alternative to building a second dam.”

—*Sydney Morning Herald* 23-24 October 2004 page five

But I thought journalists prided themselves on asking politicians really tough questions. So why didn't they ask Premier Carr why the strategy does not include the building of a new dam? Why wasn't there at least one story (say, 800 words) allocated to an explanation as to why a new dam was not considered in a document that scopes out the city's water provision over the next 25 years?

Such a story could have canvassed the views of an expert environmentalist to explain that a new dam would despoil, say, 100 sq km of virgin bushland for the catchment and would also destroy delicate ecosystems downstream. And if that was the considered and balanced view of environmentalists, then I would have been happy with that explanation.

The bleeding obvious would have been seen to have been addressed, measured, considered and a verdict delivered: “no new dam for Sydney; find other options.”

While journalists did not pick up the point, the issue of a new dam was in fact briefly canvassed by the document. But the “let’s not talk about the ‘d’ word” spin was nevertheless set early in Premier Carr’s foreword to the strategy:

“Building a twelfth dam, as some have suggested, would be an expensive, ineffective response—it would take years to build and even longer to fill, not to mention the damage done to surrounding farmland and natural areas.”

-Meeting the challenges: Securing Sydney’s water future 2004 page one

Is that it? That’s sufficient explanation to deflect *any* questioning at all away from a strategy response that has served the city well for 200 years. A new dam is off the agenda because it will cost more than \$2 billion and it would take 10 years to fill. It would also, apparently, damage the environment and farmland. Now all of this might well be true and correct. But no-one questioned it; no-one tested the veracity of the reasoning. Were street-smart journalists really satisfied by this explanation from probing any further? Or is there another explanation?

It seems to me that the environmental lobby has been so successful in swaying community opinion, that both politicians and the press are happy to by-pass any meaningful public debate on the issue of a new dam.

Testing the environmentalists’ argument

The strategy document states that a new dam would damage the surrounding bushland and farmland. Where is the evidence for this statement? Who measured the impact and what were the criteria used?

Did this determination also include the offsetting greening of suburbia affected by access to more water for residential purposes? Why is this official study not cited and then stated as the reason why the strategy looks at every possible solution other than a new dam? Why hasn't anyone else raised these questions previously?

One of the reasons why a new dam is dismissed is because it is too expensive, and which later in the document is costed at more than \$2 billion. Is \$2 billion or more really beyond the means of the New South Wales government? Are there no other funding options? Have other funding options been looked at? How does the total 50-year cost of a dam option that allows for Sydney's future growth without harsh restrictions compare with the cost of the current plan which must be augmented beyond year 25? Do both options deliver the same volume of water? Why has no-one asked these questions previously?

Is the real issue here simply that no-one wants to offend the environmental lobby?

Surely it is this generation's responsibility to do what is fundamentally right, and not what will pander to well intentioned but misguided popular opinion. Have we lost the capability of making tough decisions?

Was I in a coma during the whole of the 1990s when the environmental lobby and the development industry debated whether new dams should be considered as a legitimate option for the provision of water to metropolitan Australia?

Everyone seems to be operating from the assumption that this debate has been conducted (and therefore we need not go back over old ground) and that it concluded in favour of the environmentalists (meaning that any option other than a dam is open for consideration). In our modern, pluralistic and democratic society we talk daily about the big issues. No subject is or should be restricted from the scrutiny of public debate: the republic, reconciliation, domestic violence, Iraq.

You name it and bureaucrats will commission studies and consult the wider community (including minority and special interest groups) and specific stakeholders. Or at least that would appear to be the case for all issues except for the issue of building a new dam.

The way forward: consider net impacts

It is 28 years since a new dam (the Tallowa) was added to Sydney's water reserves. And following the release of the latest water strategy by the NSW state government it will be another 25 years before the issue of a new dam is even put on the agenda.

In the interim, the residents of Sydney can look forward to three decades of being brow-beaten every single, agonising day about every single guilty drop of water they use. And if this subjugation of the people of Sydney for an entire generation saves the home of one wombat then it will have been all worthwhile, won't it?

Rubbish!

Let's get real here. The formation of a dam will involve the flooding of a river valley. Habitat will be lost. Flora and fauna will be lost. There will be an ecological cost at the site of the dam and perhaps also downstream. Conduct a study to log and measure the environmental cost of a new dam.

But such a study should also include the positive environmental impacts of such a dam. More water per capita would better enable suburban Sydney residents to develop lush gardens around their homes. Bird and plant life would flourish to a greater degree across suburbia than would otherwise have been the case.

I argue that the ecological cost of a dam should be measured on a net basis: Negative impact in the catchment is partially offset by a positive impact across suburbia.

It can even be argued that the people of Sydney would also have greater personal freedom if they are not weighed down by the daily burden of water restrictions, and which are also socially divisive since they can set neighbour against neighbour.

I argue that a net community benefit test should be applied to water options where the loss of precious habitats is weighed against the improved daily life of four-to-five million people for 30 years. I believe that a new dam would materially add to the quality of life of the residents of Sydney. I say that a new dam is a right and proper investment for this generation to give to the next. Thank God for Sydney's water strategists of 1977: at least we—and all who follow—now have the Tallowa.

Alternative futures

What will happen in 2030 when the current non-dam options are hopelessly insufficient, even with the imposition of grinding restrictions? Will it ever be appropriate to build a new dam? Are we to really shoe-horn 1.5 million extra people into Sydney in the next 45 years without building a new dam?

What kind of godforsaken place will Sydney be in, say, 2045 when more than five million people are living off the dam reserves initially constructed for 3.2 million?

With all this talk about the lack of water in Sydney, why haven't I heard anyone discussing the obvious solution: why can't we even talk about the option of building a dam? I want to hear the environmental lobby's considered and dispassionate reasoning as to why a new dam is out of the question. And then I want the environmental lobby to listen to my arguments.

It's time to bring the issue of a new dam on to the public agenda, in Sydney and beyond. If, after discussion, a non-dam option is generally accepted by the wider community, then so be it. At least due process will have taken its course.