

## **Drowning Democracy**

By Greg Hardwick

*Word count=1180 + optional fact box*

The nightly news often brings tales of grief and despair and when your wife asks you to come and look at the television, the expression on her face hides nothing. There on the evening news, the State's leader has just announced the Government's plans to build a dam. A dam, that when built, will mean your house, your land; in fact your entire community within the next five years will be a drowned memory. You and your family are being forced to sacrifice the very thing that provides security and a sense of belonging for the good of a distant, ever-expanding and thirsty urban population.

Unfortunately this is not the stuff of a bad night's sleep – a paranoid nightmare. Nor is it something happening in a far-away Chinese province. It is a very real scenario unfolding in the fertile farming districts in the Mary River Valley, two hours north of Brisbane.

The historic townships of Imbil, Kenilworth, Kandanga and surrounding districts learnt of their fate on a Thursday evening in April 2006. A \$1.7 billion dam at Traveston Crossing to yield only 70 Gigalitres per year and almost 1.5 times the area of Sydney Harbour is being forced upon local residents.

Two days after the Premier of Queensland, Peter Beattie, announced to residents his government's intentions to build a dam, shocked locals sprang into action. With reported statements by the Premier such as, "people power will not stop this dam," and "this dam will go ahead whether it is feasible or not," there is little wonder that an almost furious local opposition has quickly gathered momentum.

Glenda Pickersgill is a second-generation grazier, her family has owned their land in the Mary River Valley for 30-years. Unfortunately it is only one kilometre upstream from the proposed dam wall, so the announcement was particularly personal. Qualified in Agricultural Science, with 18-years experience in environmental management, she and other locals hurriedly formed the Save the Mary River Coordinating Group.

Her role of coordinating research for the group, coupled with facing the loss of her family's land, has taken its toll. Although the dam is not yet approved, and won't be until after the Federal Government has assessed issues under the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act*, volunteer land acquisitions have curiously already commenced. For the residents, facing such uncertainty has resulted in cases of depression and anxiety amongst a community that has ironically won national awards for riverbank and catchment restoration.

"The Mary River communities have worked hard to restore the Mary River catchment and protect the region's unique ecosystems," she points out. But, as a result

of the dam proposal “people are choosing to sell to the Government, given there are no other purchasers in the market.”

“There are also lots of people who don't wish to sell. We love where we live and love the community, apart from the fact that we know there are alternatives [to the dam] that are cheaper, less risky and less damaging, socially and environmentally.”

With such an upheaval, the makeup of local communities is changing as well.

“Friends and families are moving away, properties are now being rented as opposed to owner occupied and there are increased instances of crime and violence – it has changed our key community values and demography,” Ms Pickersgill adds.

Greens lead Senate candidate for Queensland and Environmental Lawyer, Larissa Waters, explains the absolute power of the State Government in cases such as the Traveston Crossing Dam.

“The Queensland *Acquisition of Land Act* allows the State Government to acquire land for particular purposes and requires that the parties agree on the amount, or if they cannot, the Land Court decides at what price the land should be bought. There are no grounds for appeal.”

Not surprisingly the dam will also create further issues other than its direct impacts upon communities. According to various reports, the Traveston Crossing Dam will not only unnecessarily displace communities, it will drown cultural heritage sites, severely impact already threatened species, affect the Great Sandy Straits near Fraser Island and provide an ideal breeding ground for aquatic weeds. Despite all the impacts, it will also do nothing to solve falling water supplies.

The Mary River Council of Mayors (a group of nine mayors representing councils in the Mary River Valley) commissioned a study that found the Traveston Dam would supply water at three-times the cost of other options (such as efficient use of existing water supplies) and importantly, the dam, in fact any extra dams, are simply not necessary.

The track record of the Queensland Government with its dam building exercises would come as no comfort to residents in the Mary River Valley. The Paradise Dam, 80 kilometres southwest of Bundaberg, according to the World Wildlife Fund, ranks as “one of the six failed dams worldwide”. Similar stories to those in the Mary River Valley have emerged of “heavy-handed tactics” being used by the Government to “force” residents to sell land.

Dams displacing people and threatening local ecosystems is not isolated to Queensland. The Tillegra Dam in the Hunter Valley, north of Newcastle is another similar story. Rich agricultural land, world heritage listed areas such as Barrington

Tops National Park and once again people facing removal from their land, all in the name of the water requirements of a thirsty and growing urban population.

This story is so common that as part of next year's World Exhibition in Zaragoza, Spain, the civil society pavilion will "pay homage to the persons and communities affected by large water projects" and "publicise social and territorial trauma, which tens of millions of people have suffered worldwide" as a result of water policies.

Wayne Cameron, from the Bulimba Creek Catchment Coordinating Committee is assisting the nomination of the Save the Mary River Coordinating Group – Australia's only entry.

"It is amazing, on the driest continent on the earth, that this country could not find time to enter such an important and relevant world event," said Mr Cameron.

"It just shows that sometimes the grass roots people can achieve some of the most important things," he added.

But are the politicians reacting to the demands of the voting public? President of the Australian Conservation Foundation, Professor Ian Lowe, speaking at the recent *Towards 2020 Conference and Expo*, on Queensland's Sunshine Coast, said that governments tend to react to issues such as the so-called 'water crisis' by simply "building things".

Is it a desire to leave a tangible legacy? Solutions, such as reducing water demand through increased efficiency, or rainwater tanks in urban homes, are difficult to place plaques upon. And building dams in a time of reduced rainfall is perhaps like Professor Lowe points out: buying an extra wallet to solve a cash flow problem. However, as existing dam levels fall, residents of cities such as Brisbane expect action from the Government.

“We are tired of all the talk. We have been doing our bit and saving water, but the government just appears to want to continue talking about the options,” said Venita Manning, a resident of inner city Brisbane.

“We want action that is fair for others as well,” she added.

The fight against the dam in the Mary River Valley is not a case of a ‘not in my backyard’ mentality. Nor, is it an isolated incident. As precious water supplies dwindle throughout the country, the Traveston Crossing Dam is perhaps an example of democracy being drowned by a Government less willing to listen to the people they serve.

## Fact Box

- If the dam had been constructed three years ago it would be less than 5 per cent full.
- Up to 20,000 people have signed petitions against the dam
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- Claims have been made of government interference in online polls
- The *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act* is invoked in cases of national environmental significance
- Nationally significant issues – Mary River Cod, Mary River Turtle, Queensland Lungfish (internationally significant and an Aboriginal totem), and areas such as the Great Sandy Straits and RAMSAR declared wetlands, downstream.
- The Mary River catchment contains national significant areas of salinity which impacts water quality
- Millions of taxpayers dollars have been spent on riparian revegetation projects
- The depth of the dam averaging 5 metres in stage 1 provides ideal habitat for aquatic weed species.

## For more information

<http://www.savethemaryriver.com/>

<http://www.ourgreatsandy.com/>

<http://swampnews.squarespace.com/home/>

<http://www.qldwi.com.au/about/index.shtm>