Droplet No. 11 **16th March 2008**

Droplets explore ideas and propositions which, if developed further, might improve water use. They develop ideas and search for the fundamental concepts and building blocks that one might consider if not constrained by prior decisions.

Cullenisms: Thinking about water

This droplet is a little different from the usual - on Thursday 13th March 2008 Peter Cullen passed away.

> "A man of towering physical presence, big ideas and a wicked sense of humour. Most people know Peter Cullen as the great professor, the expert debating water reform, a National Water Commissioner, a Member of the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists.
>
> He was a big man in every sense of the word. He was comfortable with Prime Ministers and Premiers, scientists, journalists, irrigators, farmers – a man of great courage – who could never be bought or intimidated - always cool under pressure – always respectful.
>
> He had an enormous capacity for work, an enormous generosity to people and the capacity to cut through the noise and focus. But the true mark of Peter Cullen is his humanity. He loved his life and he loved people. He is adored by his family and is adored by his friends."
>
> *Peter Cosier, Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists*

A communicator

Peter questioned and challenged the existing ways of doing things. He used his considerable analytical and communication skills to bridge the gap between science and knowledge, and policy and practice in water management. He was adept at using simple and straightforward language in discussing and tackling quite complex problems.

To celebrate his contribution, we would like to share some "Cullenisms" from Peter, the communicator.

On managing water scarcity

"Disconnecting the fuel gauge might be one way to stop worrying about how much fuel might be left, but it's a pretty stupid strategy."

"We have surely learned from our mismanagement of surface water in the 20th century that flying blind is not a very smart strategy."

"Believing we could meet the water needs of these communities by fixing a few leaking taps and having shorter showers was always a fantasy."

"It is inappropriate to see water pricing as a *defacto* social welfare policy. We don't do that for electricity, telephones or petrol."

On policy and science

"When scientists do enter the political arena, they must understand they are playing to different rules from those used in science and need to learn the rules of politics and the media. Unless they understand the rules and tactics of policy debate it is like them walking on to a tennis court equipped only with golf sticks."

"Committed and knowledgeable scientists can make a contribution to public policy if they are prepared to speak out."

"Scientists commonly hold strong values about desirable outcomes, and should be welcome in the political debates as society grapples with the various issues. However, they should not expect their scientific standing gives them any special right to decide value questions for society. Their science needs to inform the debate, not replace the debate."

On the role of government

"While politicians like to blame other levels of Government, the reality is that our politicians reflect what we as a community are telling them. We are all responsible for the mess we find ourselves in."

"Communities must demand that political leaders take control and responsibility for putting in place management regimes that benefit all of the community not just a favoured few."

"Governments must govern rather than retreat to referenda."

"Allied with a culture that the public service is there to implement the Government's policy, alternative policy ideas to present policies are often not encouraged."

On the importance of water accounting

"Flying blind hasn't worked and we must know how much water we have, where it is and how it is being used. We need to know the health of our waterways."

"We need to measure and manage the whole water cycle rather than selected bits of it, and we need to engage our communities to take them along on this journey as we confront ongoing water scarcity for rural Australia."

On adverse climate change

"It is no longer prudent to believe this is a drought that is about to break."

"We are entering a tough new world, and we have little in our past experience to help us make smart decisions."

"We're doing a wonderful experiment in global warming at the moment but by the time it gets through peer review there may not be many humans left on the planet."

On the Murray Darling Basin

"We seek a healthy river and we seek to share the available water in a fair way between the cities and rural communities dependent on the river. Let us not lose sight of this shared outcome, although there will be much to argue over in terms of the necessary actions to bring this about."

"We don't have all the answers – nobody does – but before we start laying bricks and mortar, we have got to get the foundations right, otherwise the cathedral will tumble with the smallest of tremors."

"The previous governance of the MDB failed because powerful interest groups were able to stall actions they felt might hurt them. These interest groups are still pushing their rights to whatever water remains in the Basin."

"It is a once in a lifetime opportunity to develop a sustainable and healthy Murray Darling Basin. There is much to be done."

"Unfortunately our understanding of our water resources has developed in what seems to be an unusually wet period and we now face painful readjustment."

"We are in danger of having a few 'icon sites' that are intermittently watered and managed as museum piece landscapes."

On irrigation

"We have the opportunity to drive a revolution in irrigation, where we can double the wealth we obtain from this water, or we squander this money in trying to slow down the changes that will take place."

"Perhaps the biggest risk to water security for urban Australians is the replacement of serious planning with poorly analysed political decisions."

"Many rural communities are bewildered by these pressures and the changes they are experiencing. Some are still in denial about climate change; many still yearn for past days of high prices and hope these times will return, if only they can hang on."

"With $10 billion to invest we have great opportunities to build irrigation communities that are economically, environmentally and socially sustainable. Is this possible in a western democracy, or will we squander this money pandering to special interests?"

On coping with change

"Drought relief is the cutting edge of this problem, and one political parties continue to refuse to address."

"We must help communities understand the changes they are experiencing, help them envisage alternative futures, and assist them with the resources to aid the transition, not pretend it will all go away if we just keep giving them emergency relief. This seems to me the key to a sustainable future."

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Acknowledgements

Peter Cullen was an inspirational member of our Steering Committee.

Some talks by Peter Cullen

http://www.wentworthgroup.org/
http://blog.litfuse.com.au/2007/11/29/peter-cullen-at-the-schultz-oration/
http://www.thinkers.sa.gov.au/pcullen.html
http://www.federationpress.com.au/pdf/PeterCullenSpeechConnell.pdf

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