

The Hon. John Brumby, MLA, Premier of Victoria  
The Parliament of Victoria  
1 Treasury Place  
Victoria 3000

4 December 2007

Dear Premier,

I wrote to you on the 6<sup>th</sup> August regarding the proposed desalination plant and the north-south pipeline. I pointed out that your Government had no democratic mandate to proceed with these proposals. I urged you, therefore, to hold a referendum to allow Victorians to decide whether these large and expensive infrastructure initiatives are the most appropriate means of securing Melbourne's future water supply. To date, I have not had any reply to this letter.

I am forced to write again about these matters. Both proposals pose some fundamental questions about your style of conducting government and each has major ramifications for Victorians. At the very least, and in the interests of democratic accountability, these matters should be publicly debated.

### **Questions concerning the proposed desalination plant**

1. This first desalination plant is expected to send a million tonnes of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere each year, equivalent to putting another 230,000 cars on our roads. When former Premier Steve Bracks announced the Government's decision about the desalination project, he stated on the public record that the plant would be carbon neutral. You repeated this statement during a subsequent radio interview.

*How can the proposed plant be carbon neutral, given there is already insufficient renewable energy capacity in Victoria and when the proponents of wind farm electricity generation have now lost interest in investing in significant additional capacity for Victoria?*

2. Melbourne's urban dwellers are among the highest domestic water users in the world. According to ABS data for 2004-05, an average family of four in Australia uses more than 1100 litres per day, every week of the year. The Government's June 2007 water planning document, *Our Water Our Future*, speaks of augmenting supplies to the point where households can move off restrictions and enjoy the more secure level of service they have historically received. Without Government using regulation and more targeted demand management to drive down water consumption, these same urban dwellers will assume they can continue to consume water at the same high rates because there's always desalination. This suggests not one, but other desalination plants in the future.

*We face a future where water supply to urban centres such as Melbourne is already problematic and CSIRO predicts that the situation will deteriorate further. Rather than pursuing a heavy reliance on desalination, why has your Government yet to develop and implement a Major Stormwater and Water Re-use Strategy for Melbourne households and industry? Public submissions to the government's draft "Sustainability Strategy for the Central Region" identified the fact that every year about 600 million litres of freshwater is allowed to flow over Dight's Falls. Why has this real opportunity to capture and treat such a significant volume of water gone without any response?*

3. With 'endless supply' from desalination, and little attention to water reduction and re-use, there will be continuing pressure to augment supply by building additional desalination plants.

*What's to stop us from having several desalination plants, dotted along the Victorian coastline? What does the State Government have in mind as far as effective planning regulations to prevent continuous urban sprawl from Melbourne to Wilson's Promontory National Park and beyond?*

4. Despite the huge size of this desalination project, you indicated recently that an environmental effects assessment might not be carried out. This is particularly troubling when experience around the world indicates that these plants can have considerable impacts on coastal environments.

*How is it possible that the elected Government, supposedly accountable to the Victorian public, can proceed with such a major infrastructure project without any formal environmental effects assessment?*

### **Questions concerning the North-South pipeline**

1. Australia's cities, including Melbourne, are among the highest domestic water users in the world – right up there with Canada and the United States. Day after day, our cities waste extraordinary amounts of high quality drinking water. City skyscrapers test their fire sprinkler systems by flushing millions of litres of drinking water through their systems before discharging it into the sewage system. Billions of litres of drinking water are used by electricity generators to cool generators before sending plumes of precious evaporated water into the sky.

Water supply companies lose millions of litres to leakages and breakages due to old and over-pressurised pipes. Every year, thousands of new homes are built with very few being truly water efficient. Hardly any stormwater is captured, treated and re-used, even though the volume of stormwater in our cities is only slightly less than the total volume consumed by households. Hardly any re-cycling of waste water goes on, despite the Government receiving major proposals to do so. Industry is not yet required to audit water use, report on it in any ongoing way or consider ways to substitute freshwater use.

*How can you justify taking water from rural areas when the wasteful practices of our cities go unchallenged?*

2. According to the State Water Report 2004-05, produced by the Department of Sustainability of Environment, almost all of Victoria's major surface-water management areas, including the Goulburn River, are predicted to experience substantial declines in surface-water runoff by 2030. Our challenge is surely to become water efficient across all sectors – agriculture, industry

and households – while at the same time addressing the significant degradation of our freshwater systems.

*How can you justify taking water for the city from a freshwater system already stressed?*

3. Recently, Minister Lenders was quoted as saying that “people cannot expect big state spending on water infrastructure without some benefits flowing to other taxpayers, including those in Melbourne.” This statement, and the intent behind it, ignores the fact that Melburnians already benefit massively day after day, year after year, by being supplied with low cost, high-quality food and fibre products from their regional hinterland. Continuous infrastructure maintenance should already have been going on. Victorians are likely to prefer their taxes spent in this way in a sequence of state budget priorities rather than being squandered on various “bells and whistles” major events.

*Instead of pitting Victorians against one another, why are you not instead selling the case to urban people that it is in everyone’s interests to see our taxes at work in refurbishing and improving rural water infrastructure?*

I think it was Santayana who said that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. Parallels with the Kennett era are creeping in – notably a preparedness to usher in policy and major developments in a style and manner that ride roughshod over people’s legitimate interests and concerns. Democratic debate is brushed aside. Dialogue with the top end of town is deemed sufficient. Dissent is not tolerated. And at the end of the day, wrong-headed public policy triumphs, only to have its limitations made manifest over time.

### **Final question**

The Bracks Government came to office in a climate of serious concern about the alleged value Victorians were to gain from a plethora of large private contracts entered into by the Kennett Government. The incoming Labor Government, sharing this unease at the lack of transparency, pledged that all such contracts in the future would be first seen by the Auditor-General prior to any arrangements being finalised.

*1. Will these two proposals be scrutinised by the Victorian Auditor-General prior to a final commitment and if so, will his advice to Government be made public?*

I urge you to take up all of these questions and respond to them in a way that gives Victorians confidence in your assessment and decision-making processes.

Sincerely

Mary Crooks  
Project Director  
Watermark Australia

