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## ***Replacing the ‘Big NO’ with an ‘Institutional YES’ – The case for community participation.***

I submit that the Water Services Entities Bill should be withdrawn and that all current Three Waters ‘Reform’ processes pause. The issues of Water Infrastructure should then be considered in a collaborative manner within the bounds of clear principles that benefit the nation for future generations.

My submission covers an area that goes deeper than the local government and local democracy issues which numerous other submitters will be covering.

### **1. Background Interest in Water Infrastructure and Learnings:**

In my 20’s I headed off overseas on my OE. One of the early memorable highlights was standing on top of Sigiriya in central Sri Lanka and seeing the ancient irrigation engineering and water gardens dating back to 477 AD. About 6 months later, just as we settled into long term OE jobs, our rented flat was flooded when the River Taff broke its banks and washed downtown Cardiff in black water; - black with the coal dust from the mining up the Welsh valleys. Lessons, not to be forgotten, were learned in those few days:

- Lessons about living in close proximity (distance & elevation) to water.
- Lessons that NZ must increasingly face up to with Climate Change upon us.

In the decades since, I’ve been involved in a number of water projects. I briefly outline two projects, with a particular emphasis on the learnings arising – and their applicability to the issues of Three Waters and other challenges we face.

In the mid-2000s, I was involved in a storm water project with the Auckland City Council. The project went ahead quickly after I put forward a concept that significantly reduced the cost, whilst maintaining the resilience. Part way through the project works, I observed that there was a serious design flaw; – and thus talked with the various engineers involved. The senior engineer of the consulting firm leading the project works gave me the **‘Big NO’** as regards my concern, saying about the design, that:

***“Engineers don’t make mistakes!”***

He spouted that nonsense to the wrong person. I then met with the lead Council engineer, who agreed with my assessment; – and the design was changed appropriately.

A few years later, we went through the experiences of the Christchurch EQs, which reinforced the need to continually learn and apply the learnings – and thereby build resilience. In early 2014, Christchurch had three heavy rainfall and flood events over a period of about 7 weeks. We were thankful that our house was unaffected. After the third of those floods, I had a brief look at the ‘flood’ areas I’d seen on the TV news and what I saw stimulated me to dig a bit deeper. A few days later, I made a submission to the CCC

(Christchurch City Council) in which I outlined a concept to resolve the core constraint that was blocking the flow of storm water.

It turned out that the Council engineers & consultants who had been working on this problem for some 16 months, had considered 14 possible solution and narrowed the choice down to 2 options. They had not previously considered the concept & location that I put forward. Then what followed was the '**Big NO**'; - the '**bureaucratic resistance**' to an idea put forward by an outsider. So much for genuine consultation. Seven months later, I caused enough disruption for the elected Council to delay the final decision making. Eight months later again, the Council adopted a solution based on the core concept & location I'd put forward.

If you have read the foregoing and got to this point, you might be tempted to have some negative thoughts about Christchurch. If you do, then I ask that you cast them aside; – because the same lack of genuine consultation and resistance to 'outside' solutions might well be happening in your neck of the woods.

## 2. Key Learning:

My main learning from various projects in the public domain is one that applies across NZ; – in every community and to those running the government – and it is this:

- ❖ **In every community there is a very diverse range of expertise, beyond what we might imagine; – and the challenge for central & local government is to welcome & harness that expertise in a genuine and respectful manner.**

People would like to contribute in all sorts of areas, but most are not interested in having their time wasted; – and they are definitely not interested in bureaucratic BS and disrespectful abuse.

## 3. How does the above Learning relate to Three Waters Reform:

- I. A core problem with the Three Waters reform proposals is that they remove (or disenfranchise) the ability for local communities to participate and contribute to their core infrastructure needs. People in the cities would like to participate. In country communities, local people have played a major role over many years in building and maintaining water infrastructure. Increasing the remoteness of the governance structures, as is proposed, will weaken communities.
- II. Going beyond the issues of Three Waters to consider the scale of our response to Climate Change issues, our need as a nation in the coming days, weeks, months & years will be to harness the diverse expertise of the wider communities. Everyone must participate.

Here are two recent comments by politicians speaking in support of community participation:

### **Boris Johnson – Resignation announcement – outside 10 Downing St – 7/7/22**

*“If I have one insight into human beings, it is that the genius, talent and enthusiasm and imagination – are evenly distributed throughout the population – but opportunity is not. And that’s why we must keep levelling up, keep unleashing the potential in every part of the country of the UK.”*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38c49OjI6LQ> At 2mins 9 secs

**Nanaia Mahuta – at Pacific Islands Forum – 13/7/22**

*“Governments may not have all the solutions, but collaboratively, when we work with civil societies, we are at an advantage in the way we respond to challenges. Civil societies bring solutions to the table.”*

<https://www.stuff.co.nz/pou-tiaki/129271736/mahuta-says-2050-strategy-will-keep-pacific-connected-free-and-safe>

To Minister Mahuta, I say that your proposed **‘disenfranchisement of local communities’** approach in the Three Waters reforms is incongruent with your comments at the Pacific Islands Forum.

#### **4. Finance of Local Government and Communities:**

The issue of under investment in infrastructure has been long standing. The principal investment issue to be resolved is a financial issue, which requires a collective central and local government approach. This need not be difficult.

#### **5. Participatory Democracy:**

The decision making in many instances of public governance bodies is bizarre, with the decision makers having little or no knowledge of the matters they are voting about. In complex matters, this is dangerous, as it then seems to lead to an unhealthy bias towards information and recommendations arising from within, and the **‘Big NO’** rejection of external participation.

The key **‘Learning’** I refer to above, has similarities with the current thinking in the area of **‘Participatory Democracy’**. Just as there is diverse expertise in every community, there is also a huge pool of people who are willing and capable of diligently considering complex matters.

It is encouraging to note that a **‘Citizens Assembly’** process is currently underway with Watercare in Auckland. URL - <https://www.complexconversations.nz/citizens-assembly/>

#### **6. Transforming the Mindset that drives Government Policy Making:**

I suggest that there is a simple **‘Reframe’** that would help Government in terms of policy making, including the current issue of Three Waters. This Reframe is used by one of the largest firms in the world, which has grown from zero to its leading position today in just 27 years.

The firm is **Amazon.com** and they have a policy of the **‘Institutional YES’** which is applied to any idea put forward by their staff. The policy works by preventing the **‘Big NO’** being automatically cast upon any idea, and instead requires all managers to write a 2 page memorandum to explain any **‘NO’** response, with all memorandums posted on the company’s internal website.

I urge the Select Cttee to use the **‘Institutional YES’** in considering the submissions on Three Waters.



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