
Introduction

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Controversies have abounded since Australia followed the United States in the early 1970s and became only the second country in the world to embrace environmental impact assessment.¹ But over the past few years these controversies have become more commonplace and intense. As so often with environmental issues in Australia, Tasmania has taken centre stage. The pulp mill proposed by Gunns for Bell Bay has been the project which has excited most public concern. But an array of State projects in Victoria including the dredging of Port Phillip Bay, a desalination plant at Wonthaggi south-east of Melbourne and a pipeline taking water from the Goulburn Valley in northern Victoria to Melbourne have also loomed large. So have the Traveston Dam on Queensland's Mary River, the expansion of the McArthur River mine in the Northern Territory, the Penola pulp mill in South Australia, the Gorgon gas development off Barrow Island off the Western Australian coast and the opening of an array of vast new coal mines in Queensland and New South Wales with significant greenhouse consequences.

Australia's State governments were under acute pressure when they developed some of these projects as the dearth of rain across much of the continent – still usually dubbed a 'drought' despite the normalcy of these conditions – was exacerbated by sustained policy failure. As Peter Spearritt has observed of South East Queensland, 'it took a long time for politicians, senior public servants, and rarely accountable heads of key agencies – from electricity power stations to water bureaucracies – to face up to the severity of the crisis'. When they did, the States typically disregarded the possibilities of cutting water use in favour of massive 'drought-proofing' measures that saw government embrace almost every imaginable expensive engineering solution – including new dams, desalination plants and pipelines – with scant regard for the costs or benefits.²

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- 1 Carys Jones, Stephen Jay, Paul Sinn and Christopher Wood, 'Environmental Assessment: Dominant or Dormant?' in Jane Holder and Donald McGillivray (eds), *Taking Stock of Environmental Assessment: Law, Policy and Practice*, Routledge-Cavendish, Abingdon, 2007, p 19.
 - 2 See Peter Spearritt, 'The Water Crisis in Southeast Queensland: How Desalination turned the Region into Carbon Emission Heaven' in Pat Troy (ed), *Troubled Waters:*

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