

Water and Politics

Short address to the Water Engineers of the Australian Institute of Engineers on the occasion of the Sir L. Ronald East Award 1999

Politics is a word with several meanings, but I am using it in its truest sense - in the truest meaning of the word - the science and art of government, prudent and sagacious - from the Greek word for a citizen.

Especially for this country of Australia, Water is politics in this highest sense. It should be at the forefront in every election - increasingly so as our population increases in numbers, and also because the most serious feature of population increase in our industrialised societies is the Consumption Explosion - everyone using more and more.

You, the water engineers, are the people to the people and the governments, that water is life to this country. You are the people that know how our river flows compare to other countries, the nature of our climate and its swings between droughts and floods, the limits to our ground water and the consequences of the great salt sea that once spread over much that is now Victoria. You know what happens to rivers, lakes and estuaries as the city of Melbourne grows and spreads, and the problems of water catchments to provide the water, and of run-off and pollution in the outputs. You know the mistakes that have been made and are still being made in Australia's living heartland, the Murray-Darling basin, that could turn it into wasteland. I have met people who have already given up on the future of northern Victoria, and look hopefully to how Israel has a sort of hydroponics, growing food expensively in sand.

And about water to drink. You know how we could avoid importing drinking water from France and Italy: many recollect can that forty years ago Australians travelling abroad were warned never to drink the water in France or Italy. Melbourne boasted of the purest, best tasting water in the world and surely it should always stay this way

I was brought up to believe - by my father - that engineers are the polymaths of society - they are the people who are lively-minded and interested in everything and turn their hand to everything. They are not just gung-ho out to leave a mark on the land; they are curious about history, and how people live, and the possible inventions of the future.

Water engineers can be students of the past, of what the civilisations of the past did about their water supply - and what failures of water supply have done to them. Dozens of civilisations now lie destroyed in deserts and wildernesses, because they did not know the lessons that we have the knowledge about today, for us to learn if we will.

Archeologists and historians reveal these long-hidden lessons to us, and we know what were the mistakes these lost civilisations made in their grandeur, their pride and their ignorance. So many civilisations died of thirst or hunger- some may even have helped to bring about climate change in the past as they deforested North Africa and Central Asia and Mesopotamia.

You as water engineers know what water supply has to do with politics in Australia that is concerned with the art and wisdom of government. It has to be recognised that the politicians and the people, by and large do not know. Yet in the next elections - State and Federal - water for the next millennium should a major issue that affects almost every other major issue and decision. Our water supply is not something to be sold off to raise temporary cash, because it can sustain or destroy our cities and our countryside, our manufactures, our food supply, our quality of life, our survival.

Politics is a word that comes from the Greek word for citizens - and you, as water engineers, are citizens. You must take part in these politics.

And here we come to another issue, and that is courage. Courage is the sinews of love and peace, not merely of military conflict.

One of the worst things - among other worst things - that was in the media recently was an article in the *Age* about what happened to people who won bravery awards. The journalist, Michelle Hamer, was finding these people who had done brave deeds were saying they would not do it again - it was hell afterwards, they were berated by their families and some of their workmates shunned them, as if they had done something stupid, and had stepped out of the pack. Some turned to counselling to stop nervous breakdowns. And in many many areas today, you find people who are afraid to show courage, to do what ought to be done, and our culture approves of them keeping their heads down.

There are reasons to be afraid, of course. My father, Ronald East, had a reputation for courage, for taking on governments and speaking out and fighting against general opinion. But then, he was safe - he could be reviled and he was reviled, but he could hardly be sacked, and in those days, he was unlikely to be sued. And he had a strong body of colleagues he knew would stand by him if he was sacked or sued. So, you could say, it was easy to be brave.

In the first world war, when my father was eighteen,, and a

mechanic in the Australian Flying Corps, he volunteered for training as a pilot in France. This was courage, for the life of a pilot in those rickety little biplanes was lucky to be six weeks. On the other hand, the young airman's actions and his courage were strongly supported by his mates and by his country.

Courage is doing what you know what is right when there are reasons to fear. Peace can require more courage than war. You yourselves may find this. I hope you will support each other strongly whenever you find that as water engineers, you are also citizens who must take part in politics in its truest sense. To say what must be said, when it needs to be said, and stand up for policies and practices in water supply that will give this country life for the future, not just perhaps short-term cash, or seats to politicians.

Adults are often made of what they learnt as children. It may be worrying that 58% of adult Americans aged 15 to 50 watch South Park, but even more worrying that so many children - and Australian children - watch. I have mentioned on a previous occasion how my father's career was influenced by a song he was taught as a child - and we played its music when he was carried out at his funeral. "Dare to be a Daniel, dare to stand alone, dare to have a purpose firm, and dare to make it known."

I hope that you as the men and women of destiny that you are, have been taught well, as children and young adults, to be strong. I hope that you have been taught well as adults to be skilled and enterprising water engineers, and tonight I have seen good reason to believe this. I am speaking not just to you as graduates but also to your seniors, about the importance of what you all do not just in the years ahead, but in the coming months. So that in all ways you can be prepared to stand alone, and to stand together, for what needs to be done, and what needs to be said - that you are prepared both in wisdom and courage for the politics of wise government and for the politics that bedevils wise government.