

The Wolfdene Dam

Greg Hunt: Rudd recipe no good in a crisis

The Labor leader's social democracy ethos would cripple Australia

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IN December 1989 the first act of Kevin Rudd, the new chief of staff to Queensland's incoming Labor premier, was to cancel plans for the Wolfdene dam. This was despite expert advice that such a dam would be needed for southeast Queensland in the early 21st century.

The experts were dead right. With approximately 70 per cent population growth in southeast Queensland in the intervening period, Brisbane is paying the price for one of the worst infrastructure decisions in modern Australian history. Wolfdene dam would not have changed rainfall patterns but it would have allowed for perhaps 15 years of accumulated water storage, which in turn would have dramatically altered Queensland's capacity to deal with the inevitable ebb and flow of rainfall.

While the Wolfdene dam is one practical example of how Rudd would govern - opting for short-term trendiness rather than showing long-term courage and planning - more deeply, it is a pointer to the failed philosophy he wants to impose on Australia: social democracy.

The impact is simple: job losses and a continued failure of water infrastructure. In an article published in October, the aspiring leader of Australia called for a debate about ideas and then identified social democracy as his preferred model for Australia.

Social democracy is also, instructively, the same ideology and the same words Paul Keating used as his master plan for remaking Australian society in his own image in the early 1990s. In theory, social democracy is an attempt to impose a layer of governmental control on markets, currencies and all the perceived evils that come from free action and free will. In Australian social terms it has meant a withering contempt for the historic role of free settlers, as evidenced in Keating's embrace of Europe and rejection of our rough-hewn past.

In economic terms, Rudd's social democracy flows from the work of people such as Australian anti-market academic Verity Burgmann and US writer Noam Chomsky, and implies placing significant restrictions on the way in which people who create jobs can construct those jobs. The comparison is with liberal democracy, which unashamedly works towards open markets, personal freedom twinned with personal responsibility, and a preference for investment over government consumption.

In practice, social democracy has failed not only in continental Europe, where the straitjacket of labour market restrictions has led to astounding unemployment rates, but also in Australia when it has been applied.

At the state level, Labor's social democracy has failed us in relation to something as simple as preparing for our water needs.

Yes, we have a drought, but rains have always come and gone in Australia. The job of governments is to prepare for such times.

The problem is therefore not one of rain but one of ideology and maladministration on three fronts.

First, entrenched state Labor governments have diverted money from investing in water infrastructure such as dams or major recycling schemes to recurrent expenditure. This has occurred as the size of public services has blown out in each state.

Second, the inevitable Labor-Green Left alliance has meant that practical projects such as the Wolfdene dam have been blackballed until a government-made crisis is upon us.

Third, even on ideologically desirable projects such as recycling there is endless indecision.

There are three simple tests of Rudd's leadership credentials which flow from the failures of social democracies to deliver water and employment. First, he should apologise to the people of southeast Queensland for his role in cancelling the Wolfdene dam and failing to provide a viable water plan when he had his hands on the levers of the Queensland government.

Second, he should take up the challenge of reminding state premiers that constitutionally they are responsible for failing to plan and prepare the necessary water infrastructure and that if they don't recycle, then they should let the private sector do it. Third, he needs to guarantee working Australia that despite embracing European employment policies, he will avoid a return to German and French unemployment levels.

Ultimately, however, the Keating social democracy that Rudd wants to revisit on Australia is a recipe for more Wolfdene dam decisions in which trendy populism triumphs over long-term courage and planning. If you doubt me, just look at Queensland's water supply today.

Greg Hunt is the federal member for Flinders and parliamentary secretary for the environment. This is an excerpt from a paper to be delivered to the Australian Young Liberals conference this month.

See the following link for an update on the Wolfdene Dam:

http://wivenhoesomersetrainfall.com/new_page_7.htm