

Non-user pays? Surely not!

It is often said that there is no such thing as a free lunch; it does seem, however, there is such a thing as a negative Xmas present. Near to the holiday season those of us who live on this beautiful island have received our first bills from the new Tasmanian Water and Sewerage Corporation.

The corporation's website states 'Tasmania's prosperity is linked [to] the availability of water and sewerage infrastructure that can meet our needs. Good water quality and delivery [are] important to Tasmanian communities for economic development'.

No argument there – we are all mostly in favour of motherhood and against littering.

No argument from me, either, that it is high time to have a state-wide water authority. Some of the smaller councils have struggled to maintain and develop expensive infrastructure and the state imposes limits on how much they can borrow. If part of the spirit of having a state-wide authority is to cross-subsidise people in the bush, that's fine. It's an extension of the sense of community that we still enjoy here.

An overwhelming majority accepts that climate change is upon us. The Bureau of Meteorology tells us that rainfall has been declining in Tasmania for at least 50 years, except on the West Coast. The Hydro has measured a 13% reduction into its storages since 1996. Perceptions are that this winter was a soaker – one of the wettest in memory. Only if our memories are short. According to the Hydro, water levels in their storages has risen to just about the long-term average (since measurements began in 1924). Even with good spring rains, by early November those storages only held half of the 1996 amount before the 'big dry' started. Surely a wake-up call.

In principle, then, a new state-wide water authority is welcome and should be an opportunity to create the infrastructure we need to live in and welcome tourists to Tasmania without the stigma of 'boil water' notifications. Just as importantly, it's an opportunity to recognise

and encourage the need to conserve our precious water. It therefore follows that water charges must reflect consumption.

There has already been much debate about the installation of water meters. It seems that as more demand is placed on water resources then meters *will* be required. It's difficult to manage what cannot be measured.

In a recent letter to the Hobart *Mercury* a disgruntled ratepayer wrote that she would 'teach her plants to swim' this year since she was paying a hefty water bill anyway. So where is the incentive to harvest and conserve rainwater? Like many others I was about to join the swing to suburban tanks.

And what of country people who have always provided all or most of their own water? Where is the incentive to maintain their traditional and instructive self-sufficiency when they pay a water rate not based on consumption?

It seems to me that these regulations must be revisited. We had an opportunity to construct a brand new authority in the light of the latest scientific knowledge – an authority that could create a framework with proper incentives to conserve water, to promote less dependence on government and to reduce demand for expensive infrastructure that has to be constantly upgraded.

And in the meantime, it seems, to say the least, an assault on logic that you can still be charged for water (and/or sewerage) when you are not connected at all. *Non-user pays?* Surely not! I certainly do not pay when I disconnect from the electricity grid.

Finally, may I wish everyone in the 40°South community – readers, writers, photographers, commercial partners and staffers – the very best for the festive season and a healthy and prosperous 2010.

