Shit City

By Jesse Paris-Jourdan

On the evening of Saturday 20 August 2005, a few hundred people packed into an assembly hall at Centenary Heights State High School in Toowoomba to hear a debate about their town's future. A local activist group, Citizens Against Drinking Sewage (CADS), had organised the event to build opposition to a policy recently announced by the Toowoomba city council: recycling the town's sewage as drinkable water.

Laurie Jones, a plumber from out of town, addressed the crowd. He was arguing against the plan. He admitted he didn't know much about the science behind water recycling. But he was a plumber, he said. And he knew what went in a sewer. He also said studies had shown that hormones in polluted water could shrink alligator penises and affect the reproduction of fish. If Toowoomba recycled its water, he said, the chemicals would feminise the town's men. They would grow breasts and their testicles would fall off. When Jones sat down, the crowd applauded.

Dianne Thorley, the mayor of Toowoomba at the time, got up to speak. She had led the development

← 'Romance' is by **Jordyn McGeachin (22)**, an artist from Melbourne. Her hobbies include drawing, snacking and stopping to pat everything on four legs.

of the plan and it was time for her to defend it. 'You've got to remember that a lot of people in Toowoomba found me a little… outside of their thought processes,' Thorley told me. 'This woman being outspoken and not mucking around.' It's easy to see why—with her butch appearance and voice demolished by decades of smoking—Thorley is not the sort of person you'd expect to be a local politician in what may be the most conservative part of Australia.

Before Thorley was mayor, she was a pub cook. In the 1990s, she opened a string of catering businesses in Toowoomba. She became a councillor in 1997 and mayor in 2000. Toowoomba took a while to adjust. Lynne Stapleton's authorised biography of Thorley, published in 2003, describes the criticism Thorley faced in the early days: 'One competitor for the top job expressed his concern about Dianne's "insurmountable flaw in the credentials of a Toowoomba diplomat" due to her language and lack of femininity. Most could read the lines of an attack on Dianne's colourful, distinctly Australian kind of language as well as her sexuality.… Anyone living in Toowoomba knows of the constant barrage of criticism that Dianne faced in the past.' But people came to respect her. A man who worked for her told me she was at the office from five in the morning till late at night and would help anyone who came to her door. She was mayor for eight years before she decided not to run for a third term in 2008.

Toowoomba is my hometown. Around 120,000 people live there, on a mountain an hour-and-a-half's drive inland from Brisbane. Toowoombans are known for their high rate of churchgoing and annual carnival of flowers. When you drive up the mountain range, a sign welcomes you to the Garden City.

During Thorley's tenure, Toowoomba was plagued by drought. On the Saturday night of the CADS meeting, the three dams that supply the town with water were less than 30% full. Level 4 water restrictions were in place, which meant Garden Citizens were allowed to water their flowers only three days a week, with a bucket. Thorley's job was to figure out how to make sure her town didn't run out of water.

Kev Flanagan, an engineer on her staff, came up with an answer. He said the town should recycle its sewage.

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At first, Thorley was sceptical. But in January 2005, the two went on a tour of the world's recycling plants. They visited Singapore's NEWater operations. At the time, about 1% of Singapore's drinking water was recycled—a decade later, in 2017, it's around 3% and growing. They visited Orange County, California, where the world's largest water recycling plant was under construction. Today, the plant produces over 370 million litres of recycled water each day, making up part of 2.4 million Americans' water supply.

Next, they looked into the science. When sewage water is recycled for drinking, it goes through three steps of purification: microfiltration, which forces the water through membranes with tiny pores; chlorination, which kills any remaining pathogens; and reverse osmosis, which removes almost everything that isn't H^20. Recycled water is safe to drink. There's no way any bacteria or viruses can get through, and while there are traces of other elements, they're in low concentrations—one study estimates there are, on average, 4.3 micrograms of paracetamol per litre of recycled water, meaning that, if you drank two litres of the stuff every day for 150 years, you would almost have consumed as much paracetamol as in a single 500 milligrams Panadol tablet. And you would never drink straight recycled water anyway; once purified, it's pumped into a dam and it reaches your tap mixed with rainwater.

Thorley was convinced. On 30 June 2005, she and the council submitted an application to the National Water Commission, a body that advised the government on matters related to water. They asked for $23 million to build a water recycling plant in Toowoomba. The plant wasn't going to run straight away. The submission provided for a three-year public engagement program and monitoring by the CSIRO before recycled water was projected to enter the mains in 2011.

All nine Toowoomba councillors supported the application. All local members of state and national parliaments gave their approval. The application included letters of support from the Queensland premier and mayors of Brisbane and the Gold Coast. The council expected funding to be approved by October. In early July, Ian Macfarlane—the federal member of parliament for Groom, which includes Toowoomba—launched the public engagement program. Recycled water, Macfarlane said, was 'going to be better quality than what we're currently drinking', and he was 'proud to push its merits'.

Then, in August, CADS formed. The group was organised by Rosemary Morley, an old local who ran a house-painting business with her husband. Morley first heard about water recycling when the mayor presented the idea at a ladies' club meeting. Later, in an interview with journalist Charles Fishman for his book *The Big Thirst*, Morley said the mayor had talked about the plan for an hour. 'She was so animated; she was so excited about it. "You're all going to drink from the sewer!" … The ladies in that room were dumbfounded. I came home from that meeting and my reaction was, How can you go forward with a project like that without running it by people? I thought, This is such a sneaky thing. There must be something about it that's funny.'

Morley met with Snow Manners, another local, and together they led a campaign against water recycling. 'They were attacking fundamental values here,' said Manners. 'They came up with a proposal that attacked the core values of Western suburban life: you go to the sewerage plant to get your water.'

CADS also had support from Clive Berghofer, a property developer who was, and remains, the richest person in Toowoomba, worth $369 million in 2015. Berghofer is a well-known philanthropist—one of those rich people who form the vertebrae of small towns. He served as mayor of Toowoomba for a decade starting in

1982 and was a National Party MP in the Queensland Parliament from 1986 to 1990.

One by one, politicians who had been supportive dropped off.

'Even the National Party members of council were supportive of it first off,' said Thorley. 'Till whatever had happened with Clive. I'm not really privy to the stuff that went on with Clive and Snow Manners and Rosemary Morley, but… I'm probably a bit more cynical than most. I don't believe that any of them were frightened of using recycled water.'

In July 2005, three out of nine Toowoomba councillors retracted their support for water recycling. They were the three members of council who were aligned with the National Party. (One of them, Keith Beer, has possibly the most Toowoomba name I've ever heard.) The National Party represents farmers, and some farmers around Toowoomba were upset about water recycling for a different reason. Before, the town's treated sewage was dumped into Gowrie Creek, after which lucerne growers downstream used it for irrigation. But if the proposal went through, the irrigators' free water supply would dry up. The National Party saw the issue as something they could use for the state election of 2006.

'Rosemary had been in the chamber of commerce and involved in getting her name out there for a long time,' Thorley said. 'So that was something for her to pick up to get herself profiled. Some people, as they get older, actually suffer from relevance deprivation syndrome. Need to have their egos stroked.' Thorley didn't mention it, but in 2008, the year she decided not to run for mayor again, both Morley and Manners stood as candidates for council.

At the first CADS meeting, somebody in the crowd asked the mayor whether the issue would go to referendum.

Not a chance, said Thorley. It was not negotiable.

The crowd booed.

In August, after that first CADS town hall meeting, Morley started a petition. By early October 2005, it had garnered more than seven thousand signatures. She took it to Macfarlane, her local MP. The same month, Macfarlane said he could no longer support recycled water in Toowoomba: 'I, on the basis of information I was given by the council, said that I would support the project. That information was later found to be lacking in detail and erroneous in terms of support from the community.' (In December 2014, the Abbott government named Macfarlane minister of industry and science. These days, he is the chief executive of the Queensland Resources Council.)

Macfarlane's decision to oppose the plan was a turning point. About five months of what Thorley called a 'political impasse' followed. In December 2005, the Water Commission handed its recommendation to the government: give Toowoomba the money. But the prime minister, John Howard, found himself in a difficult spot. He didn't want to endorse something many of his own members vocally opposed. Thorley spent a lot of time on the phone to Malcolm Turnbull, who was then the parliamentary secretary for water to the prime minister. They talked about the growing movement against recycled water in Toowoomba. Turnbull raised the possibility of the issue going to a local referendum. Nobody wanted that.

Thorley argued that referenda without bipartisan political support had a history of being unpredictable. Turnbull knew this first-hand, having led the failed 'yes' campaign for an Australian republic in 1999. But he was fighting a losing battle in Canberra against the National Party lobbyists.

On 24 March 2006, Turnbull announced that the government would approve the funding subject to a referendum. If Toowoomba voted yes to recycled water, the Commonwealth

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pledged to provide $23 million, which was to be matched by $23 million from the Queensland government. The water situation was urgent at this point—the dams were at 25%—so the referendum was set for the end of July, four months away. At the time of the referendum's announcement, CADS had been campaigning against recycled water for seven months. Meanwhile, the council found its planned three-year engagement program reduced to four months.

For a moment, the whole country was looking at Toowoomba. ABC presenter Phillip Adams visited the town and conducted a debate between Thorley and Manners. When former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev visited Brisbane for Earth Dialogues, he said he was supportive of water recycling in Toowoomba. When *60 Minutes* did a program on the issue, presenter Charles Wooley got in touch with Thorley. 'I remember him ringing me and he had Snow Manners on the other phone as well. And Snow Manners starts going on like he's a chemist. That's what used to piss me off. I remember saying, Well, you don't need me—and I know for a fact that Snow Manners isn't a scientist. I think you should try to get someone like that to refute the facts. I don't want to have an argument with him. And about a month later Charlie rang me again. And I went, No, fuck off. I'm not going into this shit.... This was too important for us as councillors to go out there and think that we could be scientists.'

Before the water recycling issue, Thorley had been popular in Toowoomba. She won her second term with 67% of the vote. But it seems to me she was more comfortable dealing with the social issues in the town; she was not the town-planner type of mayor. In 2006, she faced one of the biggest challenges of her career—and it was a kind of extreme town-planning issue.

Thorley, Flanagan and one other member of council had their jobs converted into full-time promoters of recycled water. They distributed a forty-page booklet to every home explaining the science. The booklet had cost–benefit analyses of each of the town's options for augmenting their water supply. There weren't many options. Desalination, needless to say, is not a possibility in a town that does not touch the ocean. As Thorley put it: 'Unfortunately climate change hasn't caught up to Toowoomba yet, and it will take a few more years before

Toowoomba is the seaport for Brisbane and Brisbane's underwater.' The other options were expensive and terrible for the environment. The big one Berghofer pushed was building a new dam at Emu Creek. It was estimated to cost around $180 million, about three times as much as the water-recycling plant. Besides, as Thorley said, 'There were plenty of dams around. It's just they had no bloody water in them.'

'The weakness of what we did was—' Thorley said, and stopped. She sighed.

> **We think about water the way we think about all essential things: only when there isn't enough. As a result, we make decisions about water in times of crisis, and often the decisions we make are bad.**

'You'll never beat a scare campaign anyway. But I always remember saying that I didn't want any adjectives when we were doing our booklet. That it had to be completely just descriptive facts. Not putting in all the airy-fairy adjectives, trying to make it emotional. That's the result of how I am. I only want the facts.' As such, Thorley failed to think politically about how to sell water recycling to the decisive faction of Toowoomba's population: God-fearing conservatives, distrustful of science.

Meanwhile, Berghofer paid to have an eight-page newspaper made. CLIVE SAYS 'NO' it said on the front page. Underneath the heading was a picture of an open tank of brown water at a sewerage plant. The caption: 'Is this our city's water future? Surely not! There is absolutely no community anywhere on earth that deliberately uses sewage as a source of drinking water.'

Berghofer was concerned about the science behind water recycling. 'In my seventy-one years, I have seen a number of safe scientific breakthroughs that have since proved life threatening to humans. Who could forget thalidomide, Agent Orange or asbestos?' But he was more concerned about the effect recycled water would have on Toowoomba's image. 'I am sure none of us want to lose our jobs or see the value of our properties decline....Ever since the council began promoting the idea of recycling sewage water for drinking purposes, Brisbane and Sydney newspapers have branded our city "Poowoomba" and "S#@t City".'

This last claim was false. Google 'Poowoomba'. You'll see that almost nobody outside Toowoomba referred to the town by that name unless they were referring to CADS or Berghofer himself. Berghofer did more to spread the epithet than anyone. (Incidentally, Melbourne's first sewerage plant began operating in 1897. Before then, Melburnians dumped their sewage straight into the Yarra. Melbourne was sometimes called Smellbourne because of the stink.)

On the morning of the referendum, 29 July 2006, Turnbull rang Thorley. 'He said, Jeez, Dianne, I hope we're not going to have a trainwreck today. And I said, I can hear a train coming and she's coming around the bend, Malcolm. And it sure as hell was.' Toowoomba voted no to recycled water, 62%–38%.

About a month later, in September 2006, the town's dams reached 20% capacity. Level 5 water restrictions were put in place.

As a country, we don't take water reform seriously anymore. And maybe that's fair enough—the drought is over. But the National Water Commission, abolished by the Abbott government in 2014, used its final annual report to warn that Australians now take for granted the gains the country made during the drought of the 2000s, creating 'a risk of backsliding'.

The weather can change fast. Toowoomba's dams overflowed in March 1999, the year before Thorley became mayor. Four years into her tenure the town was praying for rain. Literally. On 22 April 2005, when the town's reservoirs were at around 35%, hundreds of Toowoombans, including Macfarlane, gathered in St Luke's Church to pray for rain. 'If it is our sins that caused the drought,' proclaimed Reverend Edgar Mayer, 'then please wash our sins away with your rain.'

We think about water the way we think about all essential things: only when there isn't enough. As a result, we make decisions about water in times of crisis, and often the decisions we make are bad. The Victorian government commissioned a desalination plant in Melbourne in 2009, but by the time construction finished, in December 2012, the drought was over. All water restrictions in Melbourne were lifted in the same month as the plant's completion. Nobody could have known that was going to happen. But we did know that desalination is one of the costliest and most environmentally destructive options for increasing water supply. Each year, the plant costs Victorian taxpayers over $600 million, even though the first drop of water didn't come out until March 2017. (When Victorian premier John Brumby announced the plant in July 2009, he said, 'We don't want to be a "pray for rain" government. We want to put in place measures that will give us certainty.' Was that a jibe at Poowoomba from the premier of Smellbourne?)

'Melbourne building a desalination plant was highly controversial, and it's a concern in regards to our future approach to water under a changing climate,' Dr. Anna Hurlimann, a lecturer in urban planning at the University of Melbourne, told me. 'It sets a precedent for a supply-side approach to water, rather than reducing the amount we consume and rethinking our relationship with water.' In other words, people have come to expect that any problems with our supply of water will be overcome; there will always be more.

Hurlimann—who insisted on paying for my coffee when we met at a café on campus, saying, 'You're a student,' even though I had invited her out—told me that the most important thing we can do is reduce our demand for water. After that, good water reform means increasing supply with low-energy projects. 'I went to a water conference in Queensland,' she said. 'It was interesting to see how everyone was talking about adapting in the water industry. There was a guy from California talking about their big transfer pipes as being adaptation to climate change. But what he was talking about is actually *maladaptation*.' Maladaptation is when humans adapt to climate change in a way that makes the problem worse in the long term. Increased insurance, for example, is a common strategy for preparing for climate disaster.

But having insurance may discourage property owners from taking action to reduce their long-term vulnerability.

Hurlimann has written several papers related to the 2006 Toowoomba referendum. She went to the town in 2010 and conducted some surveys to figure out why people voted no. What, Hurlimann asked a focus group, could have convinced them to accept water recycling?

> Participant: Good information on what filters remove. Are men going to become women? Scientific information from someone from a university who is not funded by a company building the plant.
>
> All: Agree.

The pollsters also found that people thought water recycling went against their religious values. Citizens saw the use of technology to replace natural processes as a violation of God's law. A survey participant said: 'I'd rather trust God than man. The rain will come. A lot of Christians feel this way.'

The drought, by the way, continued as though nothing had happened. It was bad in Brisbane too. On 28 January 2007, the Queensland premier announced that Brisbane was going to get a massive water recycling plant of its own, built on Wivenhoe, its largest dam. If the dam reached below 40%, it would be topped up with recycled water for drinking by the people of Brisbane.

Toowoomba still needed water. And the government wasn't going to ask again. In July 2008, the state started building a pipeline from Wivenhoe Dam to Cressbrook Dam in Toowoomba. The pipe was thirty-eight kilometres long and cost $187 million to build—$115 million more than the recycling plant would have. The state completed the project in January 2010, at which stage Toowoomba's dams had their lowest ever combined storage of 8%.

It looked like the people of Toowoomba were going to drink recycled sewage after all. Just not their own—and for triple the price. But Wivenhoe never reached 40%. The rain started the same month that the pipeline was completed and it kept going.

Then, on 10 January 2011, Toowoomba flooded. One hundred and sixty millimetres of rain fell in the region in thirty-six hours. I lived there at the time and I remember stepping outside to find my street had become a river. A ute was drifting along. I couldn't make sense of what I was seeing; mountains weren't supposed to flood. But it had. All the dams were overflowing.

I tried to get in touch with Berghofer, Morley and Manners for this piece, but only Manners responded. After we exchanged emails debating the merits of recycled water, he sent me something of a gloat: 'Rosemary Morley, Clive Berghofer and myself still live happily and comfortably in our community, our home. All the proponents of the scheme have gone. Left the state. Left the community. Opportunists who were defeated after subjecting Toowoomba to one of the most divisive, bitter propaganda campaigns that any government has ever used against a community….Try running your article in the Toowoomba *Chronicle* and see what response you get.'

It's true—in 2008, Thorley decided not to run for a third term as mayor. She moved away from Toowoomba and bought a pub in Franklin, Tasmania. That's where she was when I called her. A lot of people in Toowoomba, including me, assumed Thorley left the town because she was bitter about losing the battle over water recycling. But I asked her about it. She said no.

'It had nothing to do with the water. I said from day dot in '97, I will do three terms, if I have the luxury of it, and three terms only, and I will go. And I got out. Politicians spend way too long in there. They begin to think they're fucking important. I knew that if I stayed that I would get dragged into it all as a private citizen.

> **The 'yuck factor' might have been particularly powerful in a conservative town like Toowoomba, as studies have shown that people who are politically conservative are more sensitive to disgust.**

'I gave the people of Toowoomba an opportunity. They didn't want it. So rightio, knock yourselves out. They got the other solution but it cost them more money. And now they come down here whinging about paying excess bloody access rates! Well, fuck me—I had that problem solved!

'But anyway. I see what's happening over in Orange County and I'm like, well, that's a good thing. Toowoomba chose what it chose to do. The issues still, in Toowoomba, are the social issues. That's my bent. The other stuff—that's simple, simple stuff.'

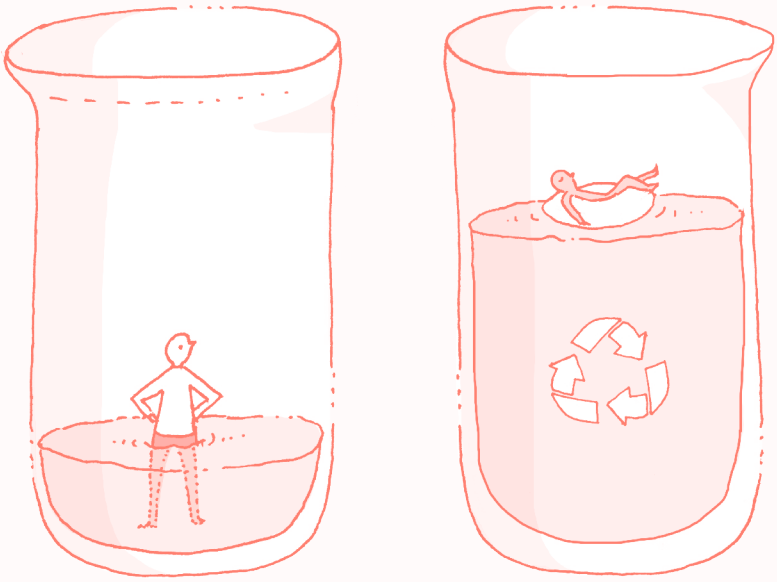
I have to disagree with Thorley. It wasn't simple. The political implications of environmental issues are incredibly complex. Hurlimann said that when she started looking at Toowoomba, she was investigating community attitudes to recycled water. There is a well-known phenomenon in the water-recycling literature called the 'yuck factor'—people's instinctual response to drinking recycled sewage water. One paper likens it to the response you might have if someone asked you to drink apple juice out of a brand-new bedpan. And the 'yuck factor' might have been particularly powerful in a conservative town like Toowoomba, as studies have shown that people who are politically conservative are more sensitive to disgust.

Ultimately, though, Hurlimann found that politics played a more important role. 'With Toowoomba, our research showed that it wasn't just about people's attitudes. It was about politics, timing, vested interests and communication....Knowledge of what's happened in other cases internationally—like in San Diego, where recycled water systems have been proposed but not gone ahead—it's been a similar lack of political success.'

There are many parties who have an interest in delaying action on climate change—whether it be producers of fossil-fuel energy, farmers who don't want their free irrigation supply to dry up, or property developers who are worried about the value of their real estate going down. The story of the Toowoomba referendum is a microcosm

of the story that's been unfolding all over the world for the past several decades. Powerful people with vested interests lobby governments and use advertising to muddy the science behind climate change. One of the reasons that action on climate change is so slow is because of these lobbyists.

This was the victory Berghofer and CADS achieved. Environmental issues are complex. Every citizen who makes a decision about where they stand on a complicated topic, unless they have a PhD on it, has to make a leap of faith at some point. You have to decide whom to believe. And a lot of people already have a side of politics they automatically back. Once climate change becomes a partisan issue, those who want to delay action have already won.



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