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"Through Consensus and Challenge: Essential Fabric of Resilient Society"

First in a 3-part series of reflections by Australia's Dr. Peter Coombes (Systems Thinker, Scientist, Engineer, Problem Solver and Policy Analyst) on the parallel journey by Canada and Australia

In 2005, Cate Soroczan of Canada Mortgage & Housing Corporation (CMHC) had a vision for an **Across Canada Rainwater Harvesting Workshop Series**. In British Columbia, two events were organized under the umbrella of the [Water Sustainability Action Plan](#) and held in Vancouver and Victoria in May and June, respectively. The headliners for the Across Canada series were two internationally known practitioners - Dr. Peter Coombes (Australia) and Klaus Koenig (Germany). The workshops in Vancouver and Victoria featured Coombes and Koenig, respectively. The two events established credibility and generated early momentum for the **Convening for Action** initiative.



Dr. Peter Coombes
Australian Water Champion &
Water Advisor to Governments

Australia vs Canada:
"Our cultures and pathways to consensus may be different, but key ideas and experiences of our change agents are similar."

Context for 3-Part Series: "A recent conversation with Kim Stephens from the Partnership for Water Sustainability in BC has highlighted an eventful parallel journey between Canada and Australia towards a more sustainable and resilient society over the last decade," states Dr. Peter Coombes, water advisor to governments in Australia.

Peter Coombes has spent more than 30 years dedicated to the development of systems understanding of the urban, rural and natural water cycles with a view to finding optimum solutions for the sustainable use of ecosystem services, provision of infrastructure and urban planning. In 2006, he was the keynote speaker for the **Water in the City Conference**, held in Victoria, when [CAVI-Convening for Action on Vancouver Island](#) was launched.

Top-Down versus Bottom-Up Approaches: "It has been a journey of different cultures and climates but similar challenges to ensure water supplies and enhance our environment whilst striving for greater inclusiveness throughout



Peter Coombes attracted a large audience to the 2005 Rainwater Harvesting Workshop in Vancouver



Kim Stephens presents gift to Peter Coombes

To read a magazine article titled **Thinking Outside the Pipe: Rainwater Harvesting Workshop Series resonates with British Columbians**, [CLICK HERE](#)



Figtree Place, Australia - Case Study in Water Sensitive Urban Design. To learn more, [CLICK HERE](#)



society. This first of three articles focuses on insights gained from interactions with Canadian leaders during the period 2001 to 2005.”

“Australia is a nation of extremes - a land of droughts and flooding rains. Canada enjoys boundless beauty and water. The easy going ‘she’ll be right mate’ culture of Australians masks strong aversion to change ‘we’ve always done it this way’. Our water management is, mostly, a centralised top down (driven by institutions) process. Management of water supply is separated from community as statutory monopolies governed by bureaucracy. In contrast, Canadians have a bottom up (driven by people) discussion ‘let’s talk about this’ about ideas – consensus via non-government organisations and community governance.”

1990s Drought - Catalyst for ‘Water Sensitive Urban Design’:

“Whilst centralised thinking prevails, impacts on environments and water security are driven by decentralized behaviours. Water is demanded and hydrology is altered by local actions that impact on the health of our waterways. During the 1990s drought, these insights motivated **Water Sensitive Urban Design** (WSUD) guidelines that combined urban planning and water management to maintain natural water balances. Distributed water management to restore natural water balances was a key idea.”

“The promise of sustainable solutions was compelling, but water sensitive projects were an aberration requiring strong challenges to historical practice. The drought was a catalyst for sustainable projects and policies throughout Australia. For example, Figtree Place in Newcastle was funded by the Australian government’s **Building Better Cities** initiative and the [New South Wales Stormwater Trust](#). Figtree Place was designed by Professor John Argue (University of South Australia) to restore the natural water balance of the site.”

After the Drought: “The Lower Hunter and Central Coast Capacity Building programme was created to support the design and approval of sustainable projects. Kim Stephens was an early

Cate Soroczan
Senior Researcher
Canada Mortgage & Housing
Corporation (Ottawa)



guest speaker at a forum (2001) that challenged industry to count all of the costs and benefits to value sustainable projects. Kim was one of the 'markers' of my PhD and made the important comment 'we must integrate land use planning and water management'."

"Australia emerged from the 1990s drought and justification for sustainable projects declined. Nevertheless, dedicated local authorities and individuals continued to develop sustainable projects. There were also examples of widespread challenge and collaboration to create change. Sydney sustainable house identity Michael Mobbs, environmental groups and the author teamed up

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University of Victoria

"The next step to make real progress is for us to begin addressing the challenges of the who, how and what of decision making"

challenge by a handful of people resulted in widespread collaboration on new policy."

Across Canada Workshop Series: "In 2005, I was invited by Cate Soroczan from the Canadian Housing and Mortgage Corporation to a series of workshops on rainwater harvesting, including Toronto and Vancouver. These events included amazing conversations and an overwhelming sense of optimism and excitement about new ideas by Canadians. Cate introduced me to fresh water ecologists Patrick Lucey and Cori Barraclough."

"Patrick hosted a tour of sustainable projects on Vancouver Island that aimed for 'urban areas that function like forests', save money (Nature's Revenue Streams), and maintain natural water balances. Historical designs were challenged to create agreement about sustainable ideas – a similar process was underway in Australia. Oliver Brandes highlighted that we need to integrate urban planning and water management in this change process."

Challenge to Create Consensus: "In 2005, a linking theme and challenge to the emerging Partnership for Water Sustainability in BC was the need to restore natural water balances. Our cultures and pathways to consensus may be different, but the key ideas and experiences of our change agents are similar. Perhaps Canadians are more open to new ideas?"



Klaus Koenig
*Headliner for the
2005 Rainwater Harvesting
Workshop held in Victoria*

concludes Peter Coombes.

A LOOK AHEAD: *Part 2 will focus on Peter's second trip to Canada during 2006 and the worst of Australia's second successive drought – the so called "Millennium Drought".*



**the partnership
for water sustainability in bc**

The Partnership for Water Sustainability is responsible for delivering the Water Sustainability Action Plan for British Columbia, and is the hub for a "convening for action" network in the local government setting. To learn more, click on [ABOUT THE PARTNERSHIP](#).

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