

# NAVIGATING OUR WATER FUTURE: lessons from Australia and Europe



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For many years, Australia and Europe have faced serious problems with the management and governance of their water resources – from the effects of severe drought, to the challenges of jurisdictional fragmentation, unclear responsibilities, and disconnected governance. These issues offer a glimpse into Canada’s future and the challenges Canadians will face in the years to come. However, Australians and Europeans are tackling these problems with a variety of approaches that can offer important direction as we contemplate how to navigate Canada’s increasingly uncertain water future.

Recognizing the benefits and opportunities to be gained from cross-jurisdictional learning, on a Monday night this past June, over 60 people gathered at the University of Victoria to hear presentations and perspectives from three internationally renowned water experts. Professor Lee Godden (University of Melbourne, Australia) and Professor Tim O’Riordan (University of East Anglia, UK) were there to paint a picture of the water governance landscape in their home countries, including the good, the bad, and the driving forces for reform. Professor Rob de Loë (Research Chair Water Policy and Governance, University of Waterloo, Canada) then kicked off a discussion on how the lessons learned from the Australian and UK experiences could be applied in the Canadian – and particularly the British Columbian – context.

All of the speakers highlighted the notion that water security is a social – rather than a technical – dilemma, as well as the important need to focus our attention on governance and the social context that shapes decisions, attitudes, and our collective behaviour.

“The era of water as an unlimited resource is now ending. Lessons from all around the globe – and, yes, even here in Canada – demonstrate that limits exist and we must learn to live within those limits,” said moderator Oliver M. Brandes,

co-director of the POLIS Project on Ecological Governance, to open the event. “Issues such as ecosystem degradation, a changing climate, impacts on water systems, droughts, floods, increasing uncertainty, perpetual growth in population, urban spaces and resource extraction collectively conspire to challenge our current approaches...and emphasize that we might need to find some new ideas and think about ecology.”

Although, on the surface, the political, cultural and ecological fabrics of Australia, the UK and Canada may appear quite different, as the guest speakers gave their presentations, it became increasingly obvious that there are many similarities and lessons to be shared across these borders. As Professor Rob de Loë observed, “The trick is to see how we can, in a very sophisticated and savvy way, learn from these novel [governance] experiments that are going on in other countries.”

The universal nature of governance problems was prevalent – particularly the complexity of issues and interactions between stakeholders. An example of this is seen in the differing mandates and associated conflicting governance structures of England’s Water Services Regulation Authority (Ofwat) and its Drinking Water Inspectorate, with one focused more on business and the other on environmental priorities.

Although the sources of pressure for governance reform have been quite different in Australia and the UK, each has had obvious driving forces that helped catalyze change. In Australia, this force came in the form of significant and severe drought in the country’s southeastern Murray-Darling Basin. In England, on the other hand, pressure for new approaches has come via reforms for drinking water provision, as well as the need to meet the European Union’s Water Framework Directive.

In British Columbia, the provincial government is currently in the process of modernizing the *Water Act*. This represents a clear opportunity to

improve governance approaches in the province. As indicated by the presentations and panel discussion, thoughtfully exploring approaches taken in other jurisdictions is key.

Suggestions of key priorities for the British Columbia context included:

- recognizing the importance of understanding our ‘water cultures,’ and how our attitudes and behaviours towards water can be more sustainable;
- embedding sustainability science;
- creating an opportunity for local water champions, or watershed ambassadors, who can motivate, educate, and serve as two-way communicators between community interests and concerns and local and senior government;
- changing the way of allocating water rights; and
- starting to look to future generations so they can become touchstones for better water stewardship now.

“We need much more to be flexible about the way we see water futures,” said Professor Tim O’Riordan. “[We need] an agenda of stewardship and care and empathy, and not an agenda of constriction and narrow-minded thinking.”

This event made clear the importance of beginning to talk about water issues as much for nature as for people. To do this effectively, we must think in the long-term as we chart our course for navigating our water future.

*This event was hosted by the POLIS Project on Ecological Governance, in partnership with the University of Waterloo, Water Policy and Governance Group, BC Water & Waste Association, British Columbia Branch of the Canadian Water Resources Association, Partnership for Water Sustainability in BC, University of Victoria’s Environmental Law Centre, and Water Canada Magazine.*

A recording of the event is available on YouTube:  
[www.youtube.com/poliswaterproject](http://www.youtube.com/poliswaterproject)