

Spotlight on region's dam issue

In this week's edition of his column, JOHN ANDERSEN has handed the floor to former Herbert MP Ewen Jones, who discusses his thoughts on one of NQ's most contentious issues

WHICH one will get the gong? Hells Gate on the upper Burdekin or raising the height of the Burdekin Dam wall by another 14.6 metres which is its original design height? This is the question arousing so much passion among arm-chair nation builders, politicians, development bodies and Chambers of Commerce from Hughenden and Charters Towers, Ayr and Home Hill and to Townsville. Member for Kennedy Bob Kennedy is pushing for the Hells Gate Dam on the upper Burdekin.

There is no Environmental Impact Study underway for Hells Gate and no business case has been developed, but Mr Katter has plenty of support... but not that of University of Queensland political historian Chris Salisbury. Brisbane-based Mr Salisbury scornfully flicked Hells Gate away as "pie in the sky, pioneer thinking".

He said there was a belief among politicians that Queenslanders responded to "big, shiny things" like dams.

What Mr Salisbury failed to concede was that when he turns his taps on at home the water that runs out comes from the Somerset and Wivenhoe Dams upstream on the Stanley and Brisbane Rivers.

Others, including the former Liberal Member for Herbert Peter Lindsay and the former Labor Member Herbert Ted Lindsay want to see the Burdekin Dam raised by another 14.6 metres. And like Mr Katter they have plenty of support.

The Palaszczuk Labor government has shown little interest in either projects. This feeds a belief that if David Crisafulli leads the Queensland LNP to victory at the next election "big, shiny things" might be back on the agenda.

If Mr Crisafulli has to make a choice between Hells Gate and Burdekin Dam Stage 2, the smart money is on the latter, purely because it will be cheaper

water for the enduser.

If he is elected he might feel the need, just like Vespasian who built the Roman colosseum, to build a grand structure that will leave an indelible footprint, marking him a ruler above all others.

But, then again is he interested? And even if he is, will there be enough cash in the Crisafulli vault to build a dam or will he have to go to the Federal Government, begging bowl in hand? And so on it goes... THIS week in Talk of the North Ewen Jones, the Liberal Member for the Townsville seat of Herbert from 2010 to 2016, puts his cards on the table and queries why either dam should be built. The now golfing equipment expert tells the story about how Malcolm Turnbull, when Prime Minister, used the fact that Townsville had only ever pumped water from the Burdekin Dam once to supplement its water supply.

When Mr Jones used to press him about dam funding, Turnbull would say, "So you have used the water from the Burdekin Falls Dam once since 1987 and you want another dam?" There are answers to that, but still, fair question.

BY EWEN JONES THE real question is not Hells Gate or Burdekin Falls Dams. The real question is why do either? I got the money for the feasibility study for Hell's Gate. Barnaby Joyce refused to spend the money. His principal reason was that the Queensland Government (Jackie Trad) only saw Hell's Gate as further water security for Townsville. Bob Katter wants Hell's Gate, supposedly to be the base from which water can be pumped west to the Mitchell Grass Plains and create new agricultural economic strains.

However, we all know Bob really wants it as a legacy item for his time in Parliament.

I never believed it was feasible to pump water west. I had spoken to people who said that when the Clarke River came into the Burdekin in full flow, it stopped the Burdekin.

It was too steep to economically pump the water back up the hills and get it west in any way that a farmer might be able to afford the stuff.

I pitched it to Malcom Turnbull that it was better to spend the money on the feasibility study to disprove the economics of it all, than to let Katter off the leash and have him campaign on something which costs so little.

He agreed.

I do believe that Malcolm thought the same as former State Labor Deputy-Premier Jackie Trad. This was that Hell's Gate would end up as more water security for Townsville.

He used to say to me “so, you have used the water from the Burdekin Falls Dam once since 1987, and you want another dam?” He was keen on water and had been the Minister so he knew just how intransigent the States could and would be.

The same thing goes for raising the Burdekin Dam wall the full 14.6 metres. We have pumped from the dam once since 1987.

We have spent \$400 million so far duplicating what is essentially a hose from the dam to Townsville, but still cannot provide water on a gravity feed. The pipeline will be larger so the costs to pump will be higher.

Worse still, there has been zero thought put into value adding the second pipeline to offset some of this cost.

If Australia is serious about the development of the north of the country, then Townsville must be the hub for that growth.

When former Liberal Party politician Andrew Robb made the announcement, he said that we needed six million people north of the Tropic of Capricorn by 2050. We currently have one million.

Only north Queensland has the infrastructure to grow significantly. The Northern Territory can grow, but has such a low base of population, it will lag unless it becomes a free drop-in centre for all of Indonesia. Western Australia is just not interested in the north of their state.

It has the most centralised economy in the country, possibly the World.

So, faced with these obvious obstacles, the study morphed into what could be done along the flood plains of the Burdekin River, below a Hell's Gate Dam site.

Yes, the agriculture sector would be enhanced, and some crops would grow brilliantly for domestic and international markets. But that was not the remit of the study. Additionally, it is my belief that the same result could be achieved with a series of weirs up-river from the Burdekin Dam wall at a fraction of the cost.

Why lift the Burdekin Dam to its full height? Its main purpose is to provide water security to Townsville, but the Council will not push the button to pump because it hurts the ratepayer, and the engineering does not allow gravity fed water supply to the city.

You would think gravity fed was the most difficult thing in the world, yet the Romans did it all those thousands of years ago without a single computer.

That the Federal Government built the Burdekin Falls Dam and the dam on the Ord should not be understated. For all of Joh's and Bob's words about being there for all of Queensland, their record of dams and power stations does not stack up when the light is shone upon their record. Joh was not even happy about having to build the road, but apparently Sir Leslie Thiess was... (If Peter Lindsay is involved in this discussion, you can bet that David Crisafulli is not far behind. I said, when Palaszczuk won the last election, that David Crisafulli would win the subsequent election in a canter, and I see no reason to change my mind.

But will he need a big project like this to secure the North? KAP will win the seats west of Townsville. When I became the Member for Herbert, I approached Bob Katter to see if we could work together.

My reasoning was that whatever was delivered in his electorate had to go through mine and would be built by people and companies from Townsville. While he was initially receptive, he never did anything to encourage me to work with him and when I tried to extend the hand of co-operation, he took the credit and gazumped me. I cannot see Robbie Katter being any different.) So, you can see that this argument seems to go around in circles. We don't know why we are really building these dams or for what the water will be used.

We do know that pumping it west will mean it will be, in all probability, too expensive to be used and that Townsville already has enough water with the existing Burdekin Falls Dam.

If the words put forward by people such as the Federal National Party's Bridget McKenzie, that Townsville needs to grow to be one million people strong, then we will need more water. When Tony Mooney lost the Mayoralty in 2008 we were a city of nearly 200,000 people.

In 2022 under Jenny Hill we are a city of nearly 200,000 people.

That means, in reality, we are going backwards. When David Littleproud was a Minister, he had a Q and A at the Mercure Inn. Every mayor in the region was there and no one asked him how we could possibly get to one million people. Townsville Enterprise Ltd chaired the meeting!! Can you really see Anthony Albanese's Agriculture Minister Murray Watt pushing this along? I can't.

I made a suggestion which was to build weirs, using the Big Rocks Weir figure of \$40million, and place three or four along the Burdekin River to facilitate agriculture, then spend \$100million to \$200million around Hughenden, Richmond, Julia Creek, Cloncurry, and Mt Isa on water security and agricultural pursuits, and you would be around \$4billion better off than building Hell's Gate, and you would get a better result.

I have also suggested we make an offer to Coles and Woolworths to give them free water from the pipeline to Townsville to provide hot-house fruit and vegetables, anything they can grow to value-add to this exercise.

I even suggested making the offer to Singapore: free water and all they have to do is build the hot houses or mini dams or whatever. We get jobs and they get cheaper produce. All of this fell on deaf ears.

So I go back to the start of this missive – why are we building these dams?