

**Submission
No 123**

**INQUIRY INTO PROPOSAL TO RAISE THE
WARRAGAMBA DAM WALL**

Name: The Hon Robert (Bob) Debus

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NSW Legislative Council Select Committee on the Proposal to Raise the Warragamba Dam Wall

In the early 2000s I was Member for Blue Mountains, Minister for Environment and Minister for Emergency Services and therefore intimately concerned with initiatives at the time to construct an auxiliary spillway to guarantee the safety of the Warragamba Dam wall; to improve flood safety and evacuation measures in the Hawkesbury Valley; and to legislate amendments to the National Parks and Wildlife Act which prevented further inundation of land upstream from the Dam wall.

That legislative change was consistent with the obligations of State and Federal Governments to protect the 'outstanding universal value' of the Blue Mountains National Park, then very recently inscribed upon the list of World Heritage by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee.

I do not doubt that the mitigation and safety measures taken 15 years ago can be improved upon but I have been deeply concerned about the assumptions that apparently lie behind the present Dam wall proposal, and about the closed and opaque quality of the Government's decision-making procedures. Agitation in favour of the Government's proposal has been conducted by the insurance industry almost alone.

The flood management strategy released to the public in 2017 starts with a conclusion that should instead have suggested a question. The population living on the Hawkesbury Nepean Floodplain, it is said, will double in thirty years. This assertion is flawed in two ways. It fails to acknowledge the capacity of Government to prevent further floodplain development, should it so wish. And it ignores best practise elsewhere in the developed world, where it is policy to reduce or eliminate floodplain population, not to increase it.

Advice that I have received from academic experts and former public servants (some of which I expect to be presented to the Select Committee) confirms the established understanding which informed previous decision-making: that it would be impossible to flood-proof the Hawkesbury Valley even if rivers other than the Warragamba had not contributed significantly to many historical floods; that credible management alternatives to the raising of the Dam wall exist and deserve serious consideration; and critically, that the wall raising will have negligible effect upon a major flood at Windsor.

The Government's policy is contradictory. Purporting to save lives it would actually place more people in danger from flooding.

The Government's procedures allow for no peer review of its flood strategy and limit public access to its assessment process. In public documents and consultation arguments that contradict the Government's policy settings are discarded or avoided, not examined openly. Although major elements of Dam wall policy are the subject of credible professional concern none have been subject to open independent scrutiny.

It is now evident for instance, that an assessment of the effects of inundation upon Gundungurra cultural heritage is entirely inadequate and there is a strong likelihood that

the threatened species assessment now under way would not be able to withstand peer review either.

If the potential effects of the Government's policy below the Dam wall have been overplayed the opposite is true for potential effects above the Dam wall. The obligation of Australian Governments to protect the "outstanding universal value" of the Blue Mountains World Heritage Area, accepted at the time of World Heritage inscription, has barely been mentioned in State Government documents: although the World Heritage Committee itself has already expressed its concern about the proposal to raise the Dam wall at its meeting last July.

It cannot credibly be argued that the new proposal will not do damage to the World Heritage Area. So the casual lack of concern shown by the State Government for our World Heritage obligations threatens Australia's international reputation.

Bob Debus, September 2019