

# Briefing Note



## Corporatisation of the Water Board

by

Sharon Rose

No 014/94



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**Sharon Rose**

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## INTRODUCTION

This briefing note has been prepared in the context of the Government's stated intention in the Governor's Speech of 1st March, 1994, to corporatise the Sydney Water Board in the current parliamentary session: "This year the government will introduce legislation to corporatise the Water Board. This will be another significant step in the continued reform of the Water Board. The Board will be able to concentrate on its core business, and maximise the efficiency of its operations. It will make the Board more accountable to Government and the community."<sup>1</sup>

This paper considers the context of economic reform which has seen corporatisation and privatisation of Government Trading Enterprises (GTEs) take place. As a case study, the corporatisation of the former Hunter Water Board is examined, as is the enabling legislation, the *State Owned Corporations Act 1989*. The paper will also consider issues raised on both sides of the debate.

## BACKGROUND

Any discussion concerning the advantages and disadvantages of corporatisation and privatisation of Government Trading Enterprises (GTEs) must be seen in the context of the wider economic reform agenda which has been embraced, to some extent, by all spheres of Government.

There has been a perception for a number of years that society is not obtaining the maximum return from public sector management of resources and it has been claimed that objectives in the past have been poorly defined, complex and unstable. In implementing operational, financial and pricing policies akin to the private sector there are three avenues of institutional organisation available; privatisation, corporatisation and commercialisation.

"EPAC research found that, in 1990, the gap between the productivity of major Australian PTEs (Public Trading Enterprises) and best practice overseas was of the order of 30 per cent. It is not surprising that the Hilmer Report on National Competition Policy recommended adoption of the following 'principles' of reform:

- the separation of regulatory and commercial functions of public

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<sup>1</sup> Speech of the Governor His Excellency Rear Admiral Peter Ross Sinclair A.C., on the First Day of March, 1994, New South Wales Fourth Session of the Fiftieth Parliament.

monopolies;

- the separation of natural monopoly and potentially competitive activities; and
- the separation of potentially competitive activities into a number of smaller, independent business units."<sup>2</sup>

In the second reading speech of the Hunter Water Board (Corporatisation) Bill, the Hon J.P. Hannaford, stated that: "the process of public sector reform is now universally recognised as fundamental to good economic and social management. This Government has led the way in corporatisation in Australia and this Bill is part of an on-going program of micro-economic reform within the New South Wales Public Sector. The concept of corporatisation is now widely accepted across the political spectrum in Australia."<sup>3</sup>

## CORPORATISATION

Corporatisation is the means by which Government Trading Enterprises (GTEs) are removed from the day to day control of the Government and are put on a more commercial footing: "Corporatisation is designed to create a relationship between the Government (the enterprise shareholder) and management resembling the relationship between a holding company and the management of a subsidiary. The objective is to give managers strong incentives to manage in the interests of consumers and taxpayers rather than follow the interests of particular narrow groups".<sup>4</sup>

It has also been suggested that corporatisation means that "direct influence over outcomes is generally forfeited by the definition of a corporation's sole objective as maximising the net present value of the business to its shareholders" and, that "the intention is to establish an operating environment for appropriate public sector enterprises which replicates the internal and external

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<sup>2</sup> Privatisation or Corporatisation - Reforming Public Trading Enterprises Under the New Competition Regime, Des Moore, IPA Backgrounder, April, 1994, p2/3.

<sup>3</sup> Hunter Water Board (Corporatisation) Bill, Second Reading speech, Legislative Council, 4th December, 1991. Hansard p5451.

<sup>4</sup> Corporatisation of the Hunter Water Board - a Preliminary Assessment, Tasman Economic Research Pty Ltd, December 1990.

conditions faced by successful private enterprises."<sup>5</sup>

The Industry Commission's report 'Water Resources and Waste Water Disposal' states that "While much can be achieved within existing administrative structures, there will be benefits from a more arms length relationship between governments and their water authorities. Corporatisation is one way of achieving greater day-to-day autonomy."<sup>6</sup> The report goes on to say that the Public Bodies Review Committee of the Victorian Parliament listed 127 meanings of 'corporatisation' and quotes Sly and Weigall's definition:

The term corporatisation is defined widely. In a legal sense, corporatisation means the creation of a limited liability company incorporated under the Corporations Law, and the transfer of the business conducted by the Government (perhaps already commercialised) to that company. A GBE (Government Business Enterprise) can alternatively be constituted in its own corporate form by legislation. The ownership and control of the company remain with the Federal Government or relevant State Government.

The assets and liabilities are owned and borne by the company and the company makes the profits or incurs the losses, but the Government indirectly controls the company by virtue of its share ownership. (Sly and Weigall 1992, p14).<sup>7</sup>

The following is an extract from a letter to the Joint Select Committee upon the Sydney Water Board from Mr Paul Broad, Managing Director:

"The objective of corporatisation is to make the Water Board and the government more accountable. Corporatisation will help to remove obscurities in the Board's role and the role of other players in the water industry, and will provide a statement of outcomes, through instruments such as the customer service contract, that can be articulated to the community. The community and the government, members of which would be the shareholders in the corporatised organisation, will then be able to measure

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<sup>5</sup> Privatisation-Corporatisation for the Water Industry. A Picture of current developments in theory and practice. G. Watson and S. Whelan. *Water* Vol 17, No 5, October, 1990.

<sup>6</sup> Industry Commission, Water Resources and Waste Water Disposal, Report No. 26, 17 July, 1992, p126.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p127

whether the Board achieved the outcomes expected of it".<sup>8</sup>

## STATE OWNED CORPORATIONS ACT 1989

In NSW the *State Owned Corporations Act 1989*, is the mechanism by which government entities can become corporatised. The basic provisions of the Act can be summarised thus:

- empowers the relevant minister to form companies in accordance with criteria for memoranda and articles set out in the legislation to take over particular activities undertaken by the minister's department or a state authority within his portfolio;
- sets as the principal objective for state-owned corporations the requirement to be a successful business;
- requires the corporation to prepare, regularly update and measure performance against a corporate plan;
- empowers the minister to direct that the corporation undertake non-commercial activities but only on the basis that it is reimbursed the cost;
- removes all state immunities and state guarantees and subjects the corporation to taxation including a charge equivalent to the income tax the corporation would pay to the federal government if it were not for special arrangements negotiated by the state;
- provides the corporation's board of directors with some flexibility - but not complete flexibility - to acquire and dispose of assets.<sup>9</sup>

Under the terms of the Act, the Government's role as shareholder is specified in the Statement of Corporate Intent (SCI), while the Government's relationship with the corporatised entity is set out in the Operating License. Both these instruments constitute the formal means by which the Corporation interacts with the Government.

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<sup>8</sup> Joint Select Committee Report, Op Cit, p63.

<sup>9</sup> Journal of Securities Institute of Australia, March, 1991, p28-32.



## HUNTER WATER CORPORATION

In looking at the issue of corporatisation of the Sydney Water Board, it is appropriate to examine the corporatisation of the Hunter Water Board which took place on January 1, 1992.

In accordance with the legislation, the Corporation was granted an Operating License by the Governor. This licence grants legal authority to Hunter Water to provide water, sewerage and drainage functions in the Hunter Region. The principle conditions of the License are

- The provision of services by Hunter Water
- The maintenance of quality performance standards by Hunter Water
- The regulation of prices charged by Hunter Water
- Customer Liaison
- A prohibition on creating barriers of entry to markets by Hunter Water.<sup>10</sup>

### *Quality and Performance Standards*

The License specifies in detail standards relating to water quality and performance standards for wastewater treatment works; service interruptions; surcharges and water pressure. Water quality standards are those which currently apply in general to the water industry in Australia and are laid down by the National Health and Medical Research Council and the Australian Water Resources Council as guidelines. However, these have been adopted by Hunter Water as standards.

The Corporation also has separate Licenses issued by the Environment Protection Agency for discharge of effluent.

### *Price Regulation*

The Corporation has a full "user-pays" pricing system although for the

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<sup>10</sup> Hunter Water Corporation - A Case Study, Mr Paul Broad, Managing Director, Hunter Water Corporation, undated.

balance of the 1991/92 financial year, charges for water, sewerage and drainage services to all customers remained at levels existing prior to corporatisation. In addition, for the following three financial years, an undertaking has been given that charges will be subject to a CPI cap.

The Corporation is obliged to keep the Minister informed about the level of increases in its prices. If it increases prices in contravention of the License, the License may be revoked.

### *Customer Liaison*

The Corporation is obliged to maintain procedures under which it consults with its customers at regular intervals. The Corporation publishes an annual survey and is currently widening the scope of a Consultative forum established by the former Hunter Water Board.

### *Customer Contract*

Every customer of the Hunter Water Corporation is deemed to have entered into a contract with Hunter Water and the Contract's standard terms and conditions are stipulated in the Operating Licence and were also published in the local press. The Customer Contract covers:

- Services Provided
- Prices for Services
- Obligations of Hunter Water
- Circumstances in which supply can be limited, interrupted or cut off
- Other matters usually found in contracts for the supply of services

In the Hunter Water Corporation's 1992 Annual Report, the Managing Director states: "Ten years ago the Hunter Water Board was a typical government instrumentality. Charges were high and, even though heavily staffed, the quality of services provided was low.....The Hunter Water Corporation has now reduced its debt, has become capital self financing, is fully providing for depreciation in replacement cost terms, and returns dividends to the Government. This has all been achieved while persisting with substantial improvements in the quality of services supplied and with real reductions in charges."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Report of the Hunter Water Corporation for the Year Ended 30 June 1992, Parliament of New South Wales.

## **INDUSTRY COMMISSION'S COMMENTS CONCERNING HUNTER WATER CORPORATION**

In its report on Water Disposal and Waste Water Disposal, the Industry Commission states that the approach taken for the HWC (Hunter Water Corporation) satisfies certain reform principles in relation to the need to be more commercially focused while providing safeguards against misuse of monopoly power: "Objectives have been stated clearly. In order to reduce conflicts of interest, the HWC has been given the commercial responsibility for providing WSD (water, sewerage and drainage) services, while the key roles of regulation and resource management, have been placed in the hands of separate arms of Government".<sup>12</sup>

### **JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE UPON THE SYDNEY WATER BOARD**

The Joint Select Committee upon the Sydney Water Board reported in April, 1994, and the issue of corporatisation of that body was considered by the Committee.

"The Committee closely examined the case for corporatisation. The Board is a monopoly. It is currently subject to strict Ministerial and Parliamentary supervision. Its pricing policies are supervised by the Government Pricing Tribunal."<sup>13</sup>

The Committee examined the impact of corporatisation of the Hunter Water Board as this "has been held up by the Government as the great water agency corporatisation success story".<sup>14</sup>

### ***Hunter Water Corporation: Problems and Achievements***

#### ***Problems***

The Committee heard that a number of problems had arisen upon the corporatisation of the Hunter Water Board and these are summarised in point form below:

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<sup>12</sup> Industry Commission Op Cit, p127/128.

<sup>13</sup> Joint Select Committee upon the Sydney Water Board, Report, April, 1994, Parliament of NSW, p62.

<sup>14</sup> Joint Select Committee, Op cit, p63

- The corporation is unwilling to invest in the extension of the sewerage system to new areas unless economically viable;
- Competition has yet to appear against the Hunter Water Corporation;
- Demand management has mainly relied on the use of user-pays;
- The Corporation has committed itself and its customers to a single technology, that of pipes and water-based sewerage;
- The scope of audit of environmental performance and services is too narrow.<sup>15</sup>

### *Achievements*

While the Committee acknowledged at least seven desirable gains achieved by the Hunter Water Corporation, it did not appear to them that any of these gains are necessarily dependent upon corporatisation for their implementation:

- Greater accountability for land use decisions;
- Greater openness by management;
- Greater rationalisation of middle and senior management numbers;
- Greater public auditing of service and environmental performance;
- Additional accountability for developer charges;
- Partial constraints on dividend payments;
- Application of user pays to the public sector.<sup>16</sup>

The Committee observed that the application of the user-pays principle to all Corporation customers has been one of the most encouraging outcomes of corporatisation and that local councils and other agencies accordingly became more prudent in their use of water. On the other hand, the Corporation has

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<sup>15</sup> Joint Select Committee, Op Cit, p63/64.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p65.

begun to pay its way as a user of services provided from other agencies, including council rates.

The Committee identified two issues arising out of the points made above. Firstly, the outcomes of the mid-term review of the Corporation appear to be prejudiced by the deficiencies of the audit and that corporatisation has made the Corporation and the government more accountable but only to a limited extent.

The Committee's Report also made the following points:

- corporatisation can be seen to have made the Hunter Water Corporation and the government slightly more accountable than the Sydney Water Board but this difference cannot be considered particularly significant;
- the majority of the Committee considers that all the achievements outlined above are possible without corporatisation;
- to some of the Committee, it appeared that none of these alleged problems arising from corporatisation were insurmountable and would not be a barrier to corporatisation within the proper framework.<sup>17</sup>

It should be noted, however, that the Committee's Report contained additional comments by ALP Members of the Committee who stated "we believe it has been necessary to record our concerns as a separate annexure to the JSC Report because the process of inquiry, and subsequent preparation of the Report, was made difficult and cumbersome by what we regard as a partisan approach to the inquiry by some senior Sydney Water Board (SWB) officials as well as attempts to frustrate the process of Inquiry by some government members of the Committee".<sup>18</sup>

In relation to corporatisation of the Sydney Water Board, ALP Members made the following points:

- prior to consideration of corporatisation of the Board, the fundamental issue that must be addressed is the competence of the regulators and their capability of regulating the Board in its role as an operator of the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p65.

<sup>18</sup> Joint Select Committee Report, Op Cit, Additional Comments by ALP Members.

system;

- confidential Cabinet papers made available for inspection by the committee suggest considerable care should be given to assessing the advantages and disadvantages of corporatisation;
- there needs to be a 'healthy tension' between each of the regulators, the Water Board and the Government - constantly testing and synthesising the competing economic, environmental and social needs of the community.

The Committee Report also contained minority comments of Government members of the Committee. In relation to the corporatisation of the Sydney Water Board, these members stated: "the key decision to be faced is whether or not the Sydney Water Board should be corporatised. Yet the summary of key findings appearing at the beginning of this chapter reaches no conclusion in this regard. The only recommendation made on corporatisation appears in one line on Page 65, where corporatisation is recommended. The Government members therefore wish to state categorically that, for reasons outlined below, the Water Board should be corporatised, as a matter of urgency."<sup>19</sup>

## CORPORATISATION - ISSUES AND VIEWS

Major views expressed in relation to corporatisation and issues generally discussed are noted below:

*The Sydney Water Board is a 'natural monopoly' and is therefore not suitable for corporatisation as competition is unlikely to emerge due to the costs associated with the infrastructure needed to provide such services.*

"Imagine the impact on costs of two reticulation systems in a suburb."<sup>20</sup>

"In many of its critical elements, the water industry appears to be a natural monopoly. Duplication of dams, sewerage and drainage systems, for example, is likely to be uneconomic. However, some core services may be improved by opening them up to outside competition."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Joint Select Committee Report, Op Cit, p75.

<sup>20</sup> Watson and Whelan Op Cit, p23.

<sup>21</sup> What Price Water? The future of water services in NSW, Government Pricing Tribunal New south Wales, September, 1992, p6.

"In the case of natural monopolies such as the water industry - the Government must accept its responsibility to provide appropriate regulation of monopoly power. This Bill ensures that all these principles are met and that the benefit of more efficient service provision can be attained while retaining ownership in public hands."<sup>22</sup>

"As noted in the report the Water Board is a monopoly. It has considerable resources, technical expertise and history. It would be dangerous to simply corporatise the Board - placing upon it a stronger financial and commercial imperative than currently exists - without its regulators being equally as strong and equipped to protect the public interest."<sup>23</sup>

### *Community Service Obligations*

A Community Service Obligation (CSO) is a non-commercial activity undertaken by a GTE which meets a particular social objective identified by the Government. In the case of Water Services, this relates to the payment of Pensioner Rebates. The issue of how these objectives can be met in a corporate environment is one which has caused debate. Currently, the Hunter Water Corporation is reimbursed by the Government for the cost of the rebates. Nevertheless, the issue is still raised in the debate surrounding the policy of corporatising GTEs.

The recent Inquiry into Water and Related Services by the Government Pricing Tribunal of New South Wales concluded: "At the moment, the principal explicit CSO commitment in the Water industry is via automatic pensioner rebates. While this is a matter for government to decide, the Tribunal is concerned that the current rebates appear to have anomalies and may not address the social objectives that the community might expect. The Tribunal recommends that Government should review its CSO program covering water services in the State".<sup>24</sup>

It is understood that the Government is currently examining the whole question of policy concerning CSOs.

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<sup>22</sup> Second Reading Speech, Op Cit, Hansard Proof p5452.

<sup>23</sup> Joint Select Committee Report, ALP Members Comments.

<sup>24</sup> Inquiry into Water and Related Services, Government Pricing Tribunal of New South Wales, October, 1993, pvi.

## Views

"The obvious benefit realised through corporatising a water authority such as Hunter Water is that it is no longer considered to be a part of the "public service". It is at arms length from direct Government regulation and direct Government control. It is given a clear set of commercial objectives and operates much like a private sector company in that it is, like all other businesses, subject to taxation, the disciplines of the law, and market forces."(Mr Paul Broad as Managing Director of the Hunter Water Corporation). <sup>25</sup>

"We oppose corporatisation of the Water Board because we do not believe that such public resources should be under the control of a narrowly based organisation with a narrow commercial objective. A public resource should be managed in terms of meeting the public interest - both present and future" (Mr Jeff Angel of the Total Environment Centre). <sup>26</sup>

"Experiences to date with corporatisation in Australia suggest that water authorities might be given financial targets which will, no doubt, encourage opportunistic behaviour in the choice of accounting practices to try and make that easier to achieve. One must ask if this is sending the right signals to an agency which is initially set up to provide services to the community"(Professor Bob Walker, of the School of Accounting, University of NSW). <sup>27</sup>

"The supply and disposal of water for domestic, industrial and agricultural use has passed to and fro from public to private ownership in its short history. Over this time the location, reliability and charges of supply have been convenient policy tools for economic and social development. In our opinion this unique history of the water industry in Australia indicates the preclusion of privatisation and corporatisation as processes in favour of increased efficiency of operations."(Watson and Whelan) <sup>28</sup>

"Labour doesn't disagree with the key aim of improving the performance of our statutory bodies. Our issue is with the means this government has laid down to achieve that goal, and the manner in which it has acted. In summary, we will modify the legislative framework to meet our

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<sup>25</sup> Hunter Water Corporation - A Case Study, Op Cit, p16.

<sup>26</sup> Joint Select Committee, Op Cit, P67.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p67.

<sup>28</sup> Watson and Whelan Op Cit, p22.



requirements, entrust one department with the carriage of the program and lay down a work plan involving over 20 bodies for possible corporatisation" (Mr Bob Carr, Leader of the Opposition and Shadow Treasurer).<sup>29</sup>

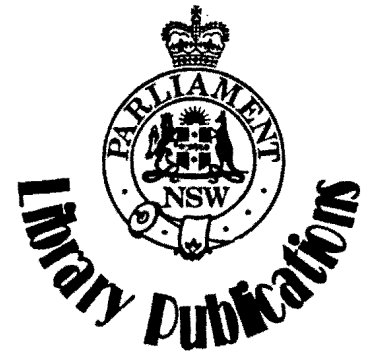
"The fact is that as a result of corporatisation the Government of New South Wales knows a great deal more about its GBEs, their operations and performance than it ever did when the Minister sat on top of the organisation. The fact is that under a company model you have assigned appropriate roles to the respective players - the managers manage, the politicians concern themselves with strategic questions and results. And if your Treasury puts the correct monitoring systems in place you have a better system than under the old Statutory Authority system." (Mr Roger Wilkins, Director-General, The Cabinet Office of NSW).<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Corporatisation IIR speech, Bob Carr, MP, Leader of the Opposition and Shadow Treasurer, March 12, 1992.

<sup>30</sup> Key factors in the NSW Experience in corporatisation, A paper given by Roger B. Wilkins, Director-General, The Cabinet Office of NSW, 14 March 1994.

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<i>Workers Compensation Legislation (Miscellaneous Amendments) Bill 1993</i> by Jan Newby	006/94

### (c) Briefing Note

<b>Title</b>	<b>Number</b>
<i>The Burdekin Report: Human Rights &amp; Mental Illness: Report of the National Inquiry into the Human Rights of people with Mental Illness</i> by Sharon Rose	004/93
<i>Bush Fire Control in NSW: Commentary on the Cabinet Committee on Bush Fire Management and Control Interim Report</i> by Rebekah Jenkin	008/94
<i>Commentary on the Building Services Corporation (Amendment) Bill 1994</i> by Sharon Rose	010/94
<i>Corporatisation of the Water Board</i> by Sharon Rose	014/94
<i>Female Genital Mutilation</i> by Sharon Rose	003/94
<i>Fisheries Management in NSW: The Fisheries Management Bill 1994</i> by John Wilkinson	007/94
<i>Gatt Uruguay Round: Summary of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Paper 'Uruguay Round, Outcomes for Australia'</i> by Jan Newby	005/94
<i>Heritage Conservation in NSW: The Legal Position</i> by Rebekah Jenkin	006/94
<i>Homosexual Vilification</i> by Ryan Takach	003/93
<i>Irrigation in Southern NSW: The Irrigation Corporations Bill 1994</i> by John Wilkinson	011/94
<i>Legal Aid and the High Court's Decision in Dietrich v R</i> by Tony Clark	002/93
<i>National Competition Policy: Report by the Independent Committee of Inquiry (The Hilmer Report)</i> by Jan Newby	001/94
<i>The Proposed Privatisation of the State Bank of NSW: Background Issues</i> by Jan Newby	013/94
<i>The Regulation of Agricultural and Veterinary Chemicals: The Agricultural and Veterinary Chemicals (New South Wales) Bill 1994</i> by John Wilkinson	012/94
<i>Republicanism: Review of Issues and Summary of the Republic Advisory Committee Report</i> by Gareth Griffith	005/93
<i>Sydney's Future and The Integrated Transport Strategy: A Summary</i> by Sharon Rose	001/93
<i>Unsworn Statements of Accused Persons: The Case For and Against Abolition</i> by Gareth Griffith	002/94
<i>Victims Compensation: Summary of the Review of the Victims Compensation Act (The Brahe Report)</i> by Gareth Griffith	004/94
<i>Vocational Education in NSW: Commentary on the Board of Vocational Education and Training Bill 1994</i> by Sharon Rose	009/94

### (d) Statistics

<b>Title</b>	<b>Number</b>
<i>Quarterly Statistical Bulletin</i> by Jan Newby	Vol 1 No 1 October 1993 Vol 1 No 2 March 1994 Vol 1 No 3 May 1994
<i>Electorate Profile</i> by Jan Newby	No 001/94: Parramatta