Drought versus floods conflict

Flood and drought planning are in conflict.

I observe two problems with this:

- Key individuals had long-term experience only with floods, and were unprepared for the drought. They lacked expertise in drought planning.
- They responded too late to the drought, and SE QLD was placed in a deeply precarious position. As individuals they have to carry the guilt for placing us all at such dreadful risk. This is an enormous burden for anyone. They haven't been publicly named and shamed, but their private burden must live with them. Having made such a critical planning error with such potentially devastating consequences, they were then put in the position of managing the exact opposite situation. How could these same people be expected to forget the lessons they had learned so brutally from the drought, and let go a huge amount of water? It would be impossible for them not to over-react the other way.
- Most of us were equally convinced right to the end that we should hold on to all the water we could, for the same reason. The drought had given us an awful fright. Right up until the last moment the key discussion in the paper was about the realisation that there was all this 'spare' capacity in Wivenhoe Dam, and how we should collect more water (say 130%) to have in case of another drought. The discussion in the newspapers reflected this. Flood was not on our minds in the way drought still was. With dams 100% full we were conserving water carefully in our homes because we remembered.
- The requirements for flood mitigation conflict with the requirements for storing sufficient water to supply the rapidly growing SE QLD population. The internal planning debate needs to be rigorous, and this can best be done by separation of responsibilities.
- We mustn't forget the lessons of either the drought or the flood, but they are separate lessons.

I was in a position to observe very closely the lead-up to the severe water shortages in QLD's water supply during the drought. With a background in mathematical modelling, and coming from Western Australia with long experience with very dry conditions and severe water shortages, the risks jumped out at me when I looked at the SEQWater supply graphs. I approached a top SEQWater executive about it. His reply convinced me that he had never experienced a drought. He was completely dismissive, saying only that “SE QLD floods”. It was a long time (well over a year) after that conversation that he finally started moving to plan for SE QLD's water supply shortage.

The implications of SE QLD's population growth need to be constantly in front of our minds. We have built new infrastructure, but not all that was considered adequate (for example the dam on the Mary River), and some infrastructure such as the desalination plant requires energy to operate which has its own problems in today's world. We also have developed language terms to obscure the dodgy reality that one fall-back position is to put recycled sewerage into the drinking water via the dams. We would all rather have the dams well-managed than have to resort to this, with the inevitable risks to public health it involves.

The flood damage and loss of life from flash-floods has caught everyone's attention, but it would have been MUCH MORE DEVASTATING IF SE QLD HAD RUN OUT OF WATER.

We never had the conversation deeply and publicly about what would happen if SE QLD ran completely out of water. We got SO close, but we kept silent and turned our taps off. We have never fully spelled out what the consequences would have been in the way that the consequences of flood are being so minutely spelled out.

Flood kills some, does a lot of damage, and replenishes the soil.

Drought ends civilisations. If SE QLD had run right out of water, it would have been the end of us all, our businesses, our homes, even our lives. Where do you 'move' 3 million people? Everywhere else was stretched too.