

The end of water as we know it

Speech by Maria McMillan of Right to Water

National Day of Action Against Water Privatisation in New Zealand

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I stand here in great sadness.

A bill has passed its first reading in Parliament that if passed into legislation will allow councils to privatise water.

It reforms the Local Government Act 2002 and lets councils contract out supply and management of water supply for 35 years, up from 15 years. And it specifically removes the clauses that say councils who contract out aspects of water supply must retain ownership and control of water. And changes to consultation requirements, also in the bill, we suspect will allow councils to do this without asking anybody.

This is privatisation. Act and National are lying and saying it is something else about flexibility of water delivery and removing barriers and efficiency.

The long-term contracts this Bill allows for are the most common form of water privatisation in the world.

The fights you hear about that are going on all over the world around water privatisation, in Bolivia, and South Africa, and India. In Canada and in towns across the United States, in Australia and in Latin America, in Ghana and in Turkey are about councils and governments passing over control and ownership of water through long term leases exactly as allowed for in the proposed laws.

And the movement of those who believe water belongs to people and the planet and not to those who want to make a profit from it are among the biggest grassroots movements of our time. Because water privatisation is costing the health and livelihoods and lives of millions of people across the world. And it is destroying aquifers, and rivers and lakes.

And

it is allowing for water to be taken from communities who need it and have always looked after it, and be instead given to corporations to try and slake their unquenchable thirst for profit.

Let's not go there.

If the government passes this bill, the Wellington City Council could contract out water to a private company for the next 35 years.

A corporation would own water until I was 75.

Water would be run for profit until my four-year-old daughter would be just about to turn 40.

Water would be managed with the interests of shareholders prioritised above all other interests until her 18-month-old sister would be 36.

And probably, looking at the experience of other countries, it would be 35 years of the company asking for more money than their contract stipulates. And 35 years of the company saying it can't meet the environmental standards outlined in the contract. The company saying it needs to increase costs to water users again and again and again, as that is the only revenue stream available to it.

And during those 35 years, the council having lost its expertise in water management would have to agree to all the conditions laid out by the company because it has a population that needs water every hour of every day and it would be beholden to the company to provide that water.

And overseas when councils and governments have tried to break contracts with private sector companies, because the companies have done so poorly, those companies have threatened to sue for lost earnings or they have sued.

And when I'm 75 and my children all grown up, at the end of the contract, would the council be able to take back control of the water?

No. It would be in no position to take back control of the water because it

would have lost the knowledge and the expertise and the mechanisms to deliver water.

Be very clear this bill is not about efficiency, or saving money, or transparency. This is about private sector, after decades of lobbying, finally getting their hands around the neck of our water sector.

It is about companies gaining access to the unbelievable profits available to anyone who is able to sell people something they can't avoid buying.

After decades neoliberalism and the ideas of corporatisation and privatisation and user-pays firmly embedded in New Zealand psyche, corporations and those acting in their interests are willing now to overtly push the ludicrous and horrible idea that water belongs in the marketplace.

But water isn't like other goods. It doesn't belong in the marketplace.

Even within the rationale of market economics, water is a natural monopoly. And natural monopolies cannot be trusted to the market or to private sector providers because the temptation to exploit the role as provider of natural monopoly is considered too great.

Water isn't like other goods. It is basis of all life. It is a public good. It is a human right that underpins all other human rights.

If passed, this is the end of water as know it.

Water will be owned and controlled by the private sector. It will be run for profit. It will be managed with no accountability to the community.

The fate of water will not be decided by the people who need water to survive to drink, to clean, to wash their children or to water their vegetables.

It

will be decided in the corporate boardrooms of multinational companies acting in the interest of their shareholders.

It is likely it will be decided by someone working for a subsidiary of Veolia or Suez as these are the two companies that dominate the global water industry worth something like three trillion US dollars.

And in the boardrooms, behind closed doors, under the protection of commercial sensitivity clauses all the conversations about a good clean water supply as the most basic of community needs are lost. Lost the notion of reticulated water supply as the most important public health mechanism and something we all benefit from.

Lost the conversations about how we protect the integrity of New Zealand's freshwater. Lost the conversations about protecting biodiversity in our streams and rivers and lakes. Lost the conversations about customary rights.

Lost the conversations about equity and justice and lost the notion of water as a fundamental human right. Lost the notion that water belongs forever and always to the next generation.

Lost the notion of water as a taonga.

In its place the notion of water as a consumer good. As something with a price. As something that goes to the highest bidder. As something managed with profit in mind.

Let's stop this bill.

Let's write submissions and talk to the select committee.

But let's organise meeting and actions as well.

Because this is water privatisation and the government has no right to privatise water. Because it is not theirs to give away.

Because once water is gone it'll be gone for ever.