

If there were water

The places where human life has grown up and established itself, in hard-fashioned cities built on centuries of effort, are running out of water. It's a millennia-old difficulty that periodically has felled civilisation. Though in recent years it has caught up comfortable society in little more than hosepipe bans, in the twenty-first century the problem is now increasingly turning geo-political. **Alex Bell** ponders the providence of water in a good location

A WATER war is coming, so let me offer you a choice. In this war you can either have a weapon, or technology to conserve water supplies. This war will either be against other humans as we dispute water access, or it will be against poor water management. Now, which one do you go for—the gun or the pipe?

I was putting this choice to audiences during this year's Edinburgh Fringe Festival. My weapon was a water pistol and my technology was a bucket. Asked to choose, the smart audience members went for the bucket, even before I had explained the merits of each, or the circumstances of our water problem: it was the counter-intuitive pick at a show entitled *Water Wars*, and as such the obvious choice for the thinking person.

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Water & the presumption of service

The infrastructure and services provided within cities are critical to their existence: they are critical to the economic activity that can take place in any particular location. Information communications such as the internet, telecommunications and broadcast media, power supplies such as electricity, gas and oil, and waste removal like bins and sewerage, are critical to a site: but, on a different level, water supply is absolutely and immediately essential. Without any one of the former, economic output would slow down and become less tradable; human life would become less rich, and

more uncomfortable. But without the provision of the latter in a place, human life there would cease within the week. Locational value—deriving from what any site can provide to those who possess it, delivered by the common birthright of nature and public provision and due to the community as its revenue—proceeds from an asset list at whose head—just below a bit of firm ground to stand upon and some air to breathe—is water. The looked-for prize for cities in future conflict will be, in TS Eliot's words: "If there were rock / and also water".

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(cont. from back cover)

It seemed a good start to what is a counter-intuitive debate. Why, when discussing water—and I do that a lot as the author of the new book *Peak Water* (see reviews, p.22 *Ed*)—does everyone fixate on the idea of our water problem being resolved by war? But then, why is a renewable resource like water becoming exhausted in the first place? And why is it that most people live in places that have relatively little water?

In the answers to these questions lies the real reason why the pipe and the bucket should triumph over the gun. Firstly though, let's be clear about the nature of our crisis. Controlled water for farming is a key factor in the global population boom of the last sixty years—irrigated land is up to four-times more productive than non-irrigated. Much of that irrigation water comes from underground wells, or aquifers. Unfortunately, though, a significant proportion of irrigated land is becoming unusable through salt build-up, and the wells are being pumped to exhaustion. Industrial water management on the land displaces people, who are moving to cities, which are themselves running out of water. As writers such as Mike Davis note, the urban sprawl is no longer a sign of wealth or improvement, but represents poverty and diminished life chances. The world's thirst is rising and we are approaching 'peak water', the point at which demand will exceed supply. That's the problem.

Is war the solution, or at least an inevitable conclusion? The fixation on war seems to lie in

the assumption that any major shortage can only be resolved by conflict. Run out of oil? Invade Iraq. Need more land? Send tanks over the border. Military engagement seems to be the civilised way of restocking our national store cupboard.

Yet there are profound limitations to war's suitability to resolving the water crisis. The stress on water resources doesn't neatly fall according to national boundaries. The USA certainly takes water unfairly from Mexico, and sucks at Canada's reserves; but the essential water problem is between a dry east and a wet west. There might be an international conflict; but *civil* war is more likely, between the dry regions and the wet ones.

Where the issue is more obviously between two nations, say Egypt and Ethiopia over the Nile's waters, are we to believe Cairo would invade and permanently occupy Addis Ababa to prevent new dams being built? I doubt such acts would either be feasible or tolerated. Unlike oil—the obvious comparator in the resource war stakes—there is no global distribution system for water. This means the pay-off for any conflict, in terms of greater supply, is much harder to achieve.

The world's water crisis is on one level about the locational mismatch between population and resource. In short, lots of people live where there isn't much water. That's because civilisation has been very successful at getting water to follow man. We've diverted rivers and pumped wells to suit our needs. The consequence is that we've settled in places that do not have the capacity to support us over the long term. Beijing has boomed, but its water is down to a trickle. India has fed over a billion, at the cost of draining its wells. Both China and Delhi have large armies and could wage war on neighbours, but to what gain? Would they divert Siberia's Lake Baikal to irrigate the paddy fields, or the glacial melt water of Mongolia to the swimming pools of Mumbai?

A more practical, if currently outlandish, suggestion would be for the people to move to where the water is—and it must happen in

time. Jared Diamond, in his book *Collapse*, on the failure of civilisations, suggests Australia has the capacity for a population of around 8 million, but is home to over 20 million. Where will the spare 12 million go? Apply the same arithmetic to India or China and you have a massive global problem. Moving would be smart, as the planet has enough water for everyone, just in places which are currently underpopulated.

Would this be our war: not to seize water assets, but to resist the tide of people who will come knocking at the border gates of the wet lands, asking for a new home? If it is, then perhaps it should be the water-rich who buy the weapons—for a war of defence.

So I am left with this puzzle. Will the water war be a very local affair, between neighbours disputing access to a stand pipe; or a civil one between wet regions and the dry; or international, and if so, who will be the aggressor and who the defender?

What, though, if there was no war? What if we all chose the bucket and not the gun? We have got into our current mess because of our success at controlling water, and because we took simple technology for granted. If we began to rate the mastery of water as one of our great achievements, our life-giver and the defining substance of our existence, we might become better guardians of its future. Further, if we recognised that the droughts or floods of distant places were a problem to us all, and we saw merit in investing in safe and steady supplies for everyone, then the catastrophe of war might become less likely.

What is certain is that a nation-by-nation, or region-by-region solution is not enough. Those in the wet world are dependent on the food and goods produced in the water-stressed parts, and the security of all depends on the social and political stability of arid regions. We are in this together. Perhaps a World Water Bank could be established, which would invest in the rich world's water systems, much as private companies currently do, but redistribute the profits not to shareholders

'Water Wars—one man, a bucket, and a cautionary tale' was a show that ran for two weeks at this year's Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Writer and one-man performer Alex Bell presented the thoughtful, audience-interactive event at Schop—an Old Town mini-gallery also hosting an art show by Nigel Peake (see 'a quick note', p. 23). "Brilliant beyond expectations" said *The Scotsman* theatre critic and columnist Joyce McMillan of Bell's show—which presented a roving international youth audience with the ideas he sets out in this article.



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The one-cup tax?

Following John Pinchard in the summer issue of *L&L*, how anyone can still justify the only tax. There is a case that should apply to all wealthy contribute more. Certainly *LVT* has the but it is necessarily limited directly dependent on the or to fixed situations work factor. *LVT* would work property, but would not mobile footballer or professional trader who needs only a room or remote cottage. How would these wealthy Surely they also benefit infrastructure and services for, in whatever country, trading of course can be. Another anomaly is a phenomenon. Everyone high street enterprise these big stores and areas of business. But under pay high street values, supermarkets would be p-values. In an article in August, 2009) George Tesco is slowly but releasing the economic centre of Machynlleth, in Wales answer and neither do would solve that one. A mix of taxes. It would from *L&L* readers what

Robert Ilson
London, England

Ian Hopton
Lodève, France

Little Dragons

It is a georgist legend that city-states, and notably Singapore, derive finance from the collection. If so, then Georgist such Little Dragons (as east) would fare well indeed. Is that indeed the case?