

FLOW Submission to the U.N. Water Conference

The Forum for Leadership on Water (FLOW) is a Canadian non-profit organization comprised of past political leaders, former federal and provincial officials, and senior staff of respected research institutes and NGOs. Some FLOW members have experience in water and environmental policy and management dating back to the U.N. Conference on Water and the Environment in Mar Del Plata in March of 1977.

At the time of the Mar Del Plata Conference the water sector had reached a major inflection point. We had focused almost exclusively on basic water and wastewater infrastructure and other forms of water resource development for most of a century, and were struggling to reconcile water development with environmental degradation. That attempt at reconciliation of objectives in the water and other fields eventually led to the U.N.'s World Commission on Environment and Development and the notion of sustainable development – the notion that we could bring economic development and environmental protection into alignment.

Since 1987, Canada and many other countries have in fact made modest progress towards sustainability in water management. For example, we began placing less reliance on major water supply projects and more on managing water demand through more realistic pricing. We began placing less reliance on physical flood control; projects and more on respecting the role of floodplains. And we began placing less reliance on end-of-the pipe pollution control and more on managing chemicals through their full life cycle.

The U.N. Water Conference in New York in March of 2023, with its objectives of ensuring availability and sustainability of water and sanitation for all, and other related sustainability goals and targets is very laudable and timely. It comes at yet another major inflection point in global water policy evolution for two reasons.

First, the jury is now in on climate change impacts on freshwater. We can now say with considerable certainty that water supply is increasingly erratic, water quality is degrading in many places, and extreme weather events are increasing in both frequency and severity. Climate change is adding to and exacerbating many existing threats to our waters caused by pollution, overuse, habitat loss, alteration of flow, loss of biodiversity and the introduction of invasive species.

Secondly, there is a growing recognition that social justice or “rights” must be brought more fully into the sustainability equation. Although some progress has been made in introducing things like the right to water, the right to a healthy environment, and the rights of indigenous peoples, much more needs to be done to make them less abstract and more real in a legal sense.

While we wholeheartedly agree that much more needs to be done with respect to ensuring availability and sustainability of water for all. It is important that the Conference recognize that this must be accomplished within a much different policy context than existed just a few decades ago. More specifically, it must be accomplished within an evolving context which takes into account the impacts of a changing climate and an evolving understanding of basic human rights.

FLOW stands ready to assist in this evolution within Canada, and through the work of individual FLOW members to other countries and international organizations beyond our own borders. Within Canada, FLOW has been advising the government Canada on its stated intention to establish a new Canada

Water Agency. Without getting into detail, much of that advice centers around the following five foundational pillars.

First, the Agency must meaningfully advance the federal government's commitment to reconciliation with indigenous peoples. Working towards reconciliation must be done in partnership with indigenous peoples, and may therefore look different across the country.

Second, the Agency must play a lead role on creating and mobilizing the knowledge needed to respond to water problems and opportunities. This should include coordinating a central repository of information, and ensuring that decision-makers at all levels have the knowledge and tools they need to make responsible decisions,

Third, the agency needs to enhance cooperative federalism in water management. The cooperative federalism must enhance and respect the jurisdiction of provincial, territorial, indigenous and municipal governments by providing high level coordination and capacity support for those jurisdictions.

Fourth the Agency must develop and catalyze a pan-Canadian strategy for water governance according to watershed boundaries. This must include strategies for realigning water management capacities across the federal government and a roadmap for watershed-based collaboration between jurisdictions.

And fifth, the Agency must bring about deep reform by addressing our badly outdated federal water policies and laws, both to ensure coherence across the federal government and to better coordinate and cooperate with other orders of government.