

# Charlie Littlefair

The implications of water mismanagement are life threatening to Kiwis' health and our environment. Industry veteran Charlie Littlefair has a few ideas around this subject. By **MARY SEARLE BELL**.

**C**harlie Littlefair sees a future where water management is not subject to short-term political influence, and is placed instead in the care of Central Government or Local Government appointed independent boards, with strong business leadership.

"It worries me that we can have instances like what happened in Havelock North," he says.

Many will agree. But what should be done about it? The answer, for Charlie, is to get short term politics out of decisions around water. ►

◀ “The council management does have a role and responsibility in this. I think we need the distance provided by business-like boards, which aren’t swayed by short-term political goals.”

But Charlie is not in position to make these changes, in fact, he’s not even in the country.

Currently a general manager at South East Water, a state-owned corporation that provides water and wastewater services to 1.7 million customers in the southeast of Melbourne, Charlie’s been in Australia for nearly 10 years now, joining South East Water in 2008 in the middle of the Millennium Drought.

“I’d married a Melbourne girl, Sam, and our baby girl, Sophie, had just arrived. My wife wanted to go home to be near her family, so I started looking for work over there.

“Joining South East Water in the middle of a major drought was interesting. I got exposure to all sorts of things, including recycled water and desalination. Crisis always does it – it pushes boundaries on water technologies.”

Charlie’s heart is still in New Zealand, however, and the family still owns a home in Auckland. Returning is definitely an option “if the right job comes up”.



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“I’ve had good exposure to how Aussies do it,” says Charlie talking about water management, and he’s certainly advocates the state of Victoria’s model of having water out of the hands of local government.

Victoria has a population of around six million, so is not too dissimilar in size to New Zealand. Charlie says it has 19 state-owned water corporations, with State Government appointed boards leading their strategic direction and providing good business governance. Their sole focus of delivering the essential water services their communities need.

“A similar number (or less) of water corporations could take care of all of New Zealand’s essential water services,” he says.

“Water quality is risk management. It needs to be professional and business-like. A corporation with a sole focus on water will have a strong approach to water quality – it can’t be done as a tack-on business to council.

“The debate always seems to end up at the asset ownership question. This should not be the debate, in fact I believe that essential water services assets should remain public assets. The debate should be about focus and business-like governance. These corporations don’t need

to be private companies. But a water corporation should be fully self-funded,” he says. “Watercare has shown we can do this.”

Charlie’s career in water began in the mid-1980s after he completed a Bachelor of Engineering.

“My father was brought out from the UK to work at Glenbrook Steel Mill, and I used to help out in the school holidays, which led to a civil engineering degree.

“Auckland University was strong in hydraulics and public health engineering, which led to water-related subjects. I’d always mucked about with water in the backyard as a child so I took all the water subjects I could at the options end of my degree.”

While studying, Charlie won a cadetship with NZ Forest Products. As a graduate, he ended up at Kinleith pulp and paper mill, working in the waste and water part of the operation, and responsible for the operational management of three water supplies, two trade effluent systems, and one domestic sewage system.

“The flows probably exceeded Hamilton’s at the time,” he says.

In 1990 Charlie headed overseas, nabbing a job with an engineering firm that looked after Severn Trent water. Returning 18 months later, he got a job in Tauranga as branch manager with Works Consultancy Services (later Opus International Consultants).

“The early 90s wasn’t a great time to find work in New Zealand,” he says. “My role with Works was very general – predominately roads, and only a little bit of water.”

But in 1995 he shifted to a national environmental engineering role, which was predominately about water and wastewater. After five years he was appointed Water Sector Leader – Global for Opus.

He joined Water New Zealand (then NZWWA) about the time he joined Opus. He was soon seconded onto the board.

“I got a good insight into the governance of the association. I enjoyed the role so much that I put my name forward the following year and was elected.”

In 2005 he was nominated for the role of vice-president, then held the position of president in 2006-07. At that time he was working for Metrowater (later integrated into Watercare) – initially as General Manager, Infrastructure Services, then later as General Manager, Assets and Investments.

Just after he completed his tenure as immediate past president, Charlie’s wife led the family to Australia. It was a move that made perfect sense, and which has offered him experiences and learning opportunities he wouldn’t have here in New Zealand.

But Charlie’s career is far from over, so don’t be surprised if you find him on this side of the Tasman again in the future. Perhaps leading a charge to take water services away from short term political sway, and into the care of professional and business disciplined organisations that have the expertise in and passion for water.

“This should have happened 20 years ago,” he says. “It’s the change I’d love to see in New Zealand.” **WNZ**