

Peter Wray Cullen

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(See also an earlier article by Åsa Wahlquist: [Man with a plan](#)).

After the news of Peter Cullen's final illness was made public on Tuesday March 11, Wentworth Group director Peter Cosier, said their phones rang off the hook. The day after Professor Cullen's death was announced, their website temporarily crashed.

Mr Cosier said the callers came from all walks of life: scientists, irrigators, conservationists, politicians, former students and people who have heard about him, read him or seen him on television. "It just tells me how wide a group he has touched," Cosier said. "His contribution to water reform was unparalleled".

Mr Cosier said Professor Cullen's greatest legacy was to help Australians "understand where they live and to be proud of what we have achieved, but also to recognise we need to fundamentally change the way we manage Australia, not in a negative gloom and doom way, but in a positive, inspirational way."

Former head of CSIRO Land and Water, and Wentworth Group member, John Williams, said Professor Cullen "turned the tide in both the political areas and in the community."

Dr Williams worked with Cullen on dryland salinity and ending native vegetation clearing. He said Cullen was the first to argue that rivers needed environmental flows.

Fellow Wentworth Group member, Mike Young, described Cullen as "a giant in every sense of the word. A big person with big ideas – big ideas that were easy to understand. Peter understood, better than most, that to change policy you had to change the way people thought."

John Langford knew Cullen since their days as research students at Melbourne University. Dr Langford, who is now the Director of Uniwater, said Cullen "changed the water debate in this country and our attitudes to our river environment".

"He was a brilliant communicator with a sharp mind – he understood the political process and the media and used this to great effect. His influence in the water debate will be greatly missed at this critical time."

Peter Cullen first came to public attention in November 2002, when he delivered the defining statement from the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists.

Professor Cullen's role that night typified his many strengths: his courage, in speaking up despite the pressures against him to do so; his leadership; his ability to draw together a set of succinct statements. his eloquence; and the personal authority with which he delivered that statement.

The statement defined not only the Group, but Professor Cullen's life work. "You can't drought proof Australia," he read that night. "We need to learn to live with the landscape, not try to fight against it all the time."

Professor Cullen was born in Melbourne. When he was a small boy his family moved to Tallangatta on the Murray River. His father, an engineer, had the job of relocating the town which was flooded when Hume Dam was enlarged. Professor Cullen said he decided back then to break the family tradition of engineering for the land, and more specifically for water.

He did a Bachelor of Agricultural Science at Melbourne University, followed by a Masters degree on irrigation. He said he learnt then not just about the power of water to make the land blossom, but also the damage that the misuse of water was doing.

Professor Cullen then spent one year as a teacher. He did not fit comfortably into the authoritarian system, but there he met his wife Vicky. Vicky was then a French teacher, but later became an Anglican minister and Professor Cullen delighted in referring to her as "the good vicar". Vicky was the first reader of every paper and every speech he wrote, a clear-eyed critic and his ardent supporter. She was also deeply protective of the man who despite his failing health could not bear to decline an opportunity to write or speak about the subject he loved so passionately.

Professor Cullen taught at Melbourne University then in 1973 moved to Canberra's new College of Advanced education.

In December 1991, the 1,000 kilometre long blue-green algal bloom infecting the Darling River exposed the dearth of research into what Professor Cullen called "the lowland dirty rivers of the Murray-Darling". The next year the Co-

operative Research Centre into Freshwater Ecology was set up, with Professor Cullen as its head. He decided it was time "to get in there and tell people what should be done". He became what he called a knowledge broker: bringing together the science, integrating it, synthesising it and packaging it so it could be understood by the layperson. He delivered the information with a wry sense of humour and a deep streak of compassion. He was also a good listener, mindful of the values people held.

In 2001, he became the Prime Minister's Environmentalist of the Year.

In 2002 he retired from the CRC. He devoted his remaining years to advocacy for the rivers, and for the role of science in policy making.

He was made an officer of the Order of Australia in 2004. In 2005 he was appointed a Commissioner with the National Water Commission. He held a number of other positions on water-related bodies.

One of the keys to Professor Cullen's success was that he thought the community was tired of scientists listing problems, and set about being a voice for scientists with solutions. In a paper he delivered last year, called 'Science and Politics - Speaking Truth to Power', he said "scientists have an obligation to ensure that their knowledge and insights are available to the community that funds them". But he warned that in entering public debate, scientists must understand they "are leaving a world where finding the truth is the most important goal, for a world where winning is most important".

Professor Cullen said irrigators on the Murray-Darling need to become more efficient and produce twice as much, on half the water. Most recently he said the Murray-Darling now had about half the water available that it used to have, and halving irrigation entitlements would make them more secure.

He was a man who was across the details, but never lost sight of the big picture. Debates about water, he said, "are really debates about the sort of society and the sort of environment we want to live in."

Professor Cullen had great faith in science, in the human mind and the human spirit. He said: "I have always felt that knowledge was better than ignorance, and we should try knowledge in this country because ignorance hasn't got us very far."

Cullen is survived by his wife Vicky, daughters Belinda and Michelle and Leanne, and grandson Joshua.

Åsa Wahlquist is the Australian's rural writer.