

From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY

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HOME OFFICE
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10 January 1980

Dear Tim

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I attach a note for the Prime Minister's information on the consequences of industrial action in the water industry and on contingency plans to minimise its effects. This has been prepared by the Civil Contingencies Unit Secretariat in consultation with the Department of the Environment in parallel with the report on the situation on pay negotiations sent to Nick Sanders by Jeff Jacobs on 4 January.

I am copying this letter to the Private Secretaries to: members of E Committee, the Secretaries of State for Defence, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, Social Security, Education, to the Paymaster General, to the Attorney General, the Minister of Transport; and also to Martin Vile.

Yours,
John

J. A. CHILCOT

T. P. Lankester, Esq.

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THE WATER INDUSTRY - CONSEQUENCES OF INDUSTRIAL
ACTION, AND CONTINGENCY PLANS
TO MINIMISE ITS EFFECTS

In the light of the Private Secretary to Secretary of State for the Environment's letter to Mr Sanders of 4 January reporting the situation on pay negotiations in the water industry, the following assessment has been prepared by the Civil Contingencies Unit Secretariat in consultation with the Department of the Environment.

CONSEQUENCES OF INDUSTRIAL ACTION

2. In a work-to-rule or overtime ban (the mildest forms of industrial action), a backlog of repairs and maintenance would build up. Consumers would be inconvenienced but water services could be held at acceptable levels for a considerable period. If a selective strike strategy were followed, key installations might be picked off or limited areas deprived of services. It would also be possible for the strikers, in a limited number of places, to maximise the disruption to industry while minimising the effect on the domestic consumer.

3. The effects of determined industrial action would be serious, with some areas becoming affected more quickly than others. The scope for switching to alternative water supplies would be virtually nil. There would be rapid deterioration as many homes were left without water, untreated water circulated in some systems and sewage flooding became commonplace. The effects in winter weather would be most severe upon the aged, the infirm and nursing mothers, on people in high rise dwellings and in hospitals. Insanitary conditions would rapidly develop making urban life intolerable. The many industries which rely on public supply would be brought to a halt and electricity supplies would be disrupted.

4. In the sporadic unofficial action that took place in January and February last year, water authorities demonstrated their ability to continue to provide a service for a considerable period though at the cost of gradually increasing inconvenience and hardship to the general public. Everything depended upon the willingness of supervisory staff to co-operate in maintaining the service.

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5. If the strike became official, serious and perhaps crippling consequences could arise very quickly. If supervising staff co-operated, the industry might continue to provide a deteriorating standard of service for up to 2 weeks before conditions became intolerable. If supervisory staff did not co-operate, intolerable conditions might arise within a day or two, and in some areas within hours.

CONTINGENCY PLANS

6. General. Water authorities have made their own plans to deal with sporadic unofficial action and would also wish to struggle on unaided for as long as possible in the event of an official strike. They would be cautious about using contractors for fear of intensifying industrial action. On earlier occasions, contractors and their employees have been deterred by strikers from taking on strike breaking tasks. Volunteers, encouraged nationally and organised locally, could have a role in helping the sick and elderly to carry water from the streets. The only other source of labour is the Armed Services.

7. Services Assistance

a. The contingency plan to provide Service assistance to the water industry is called NIMROD in Great Britain and would involve 9,500 Servicemen plus command and administrative support. In Northern Ireland it is called FOOTWAY and would involve 1200 Servicemen. The object of the plan is to provide Servicemen of appropriate skills to assist supervisory staff maintain the most basic water services for a limited period. The plan depends upon the co-operation of supervisory staff; with their help it might be possible to maintain greatly reduced and uneven services for a further 4 weeks before conditions became intolerable. Without the co-operation of supervising staff troops would be largely ineffective and could only be used to mount limited rescue operations in the worst affected areas.

b. There is little scope for training Servicemen in advance. But a period of briefing would take place on Army premises during the 48 hours prior to Servicemen taking up their duties. This briefing would relate essentially to safety precautions and would need to be provided locally by divisional managers of water authorities who might need to draw on other senior staff to assist.

c. Confidential consultations, between the Water Authorities and the Services, took place on NIMROD/FOOTWAY last February and again last summer when the plans were completely reviewed. The Secretary of State for the Environment will authorise further consultations as necessary.

d. Meanwhile Servicemen remain at their normal 7 days' notice for tasks of this nature.

8. Emergency Powers. Whilst the use of Servicemen does not require emergency powers, a state of emergency might need to be proclaimed at some stage, in order to mobilise public opinion and to protect water authorities from the legal consequence of failing to carry out their statutory obligations. The timing would be largely a matter of political judgement. Draft regulations are held in readiness.

9. Co-ordination

a. Plans, which can be brought into action at 24 hours' notice, have been made for an emergency system of reporting to Government by water authorities and DOE regional directors.

b. Each water authority is responsible for making its own detailed plans and conducting operations. Co-ordination at national level would be secured by consultation from time to time between Ministers and the Chairmen of the water authorities and the National Water Council, and between officials. Chief Executives would be the principle links between the DOE and the Water Authorities.

c. The Government's role would be co-ordinated by the Civil Contingencies Unit. In the regions, the DOE Regional Directors would liaise with colleagues from the Regional Offices of other Government Departments and would advise water authorities on matters of local government. If the local situation deteriorated beyond a certain point the Government would need to consider establishing Regional Emergency Committees; these would be chaired by DOE Regional Directors in England who would co-ordinate the response of Government Departments in the regions. The territorial departments would co-ordinate activities in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

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10. Public Relations. As in any strike affecting supplies and services essential to the life of the community, it would be very important to bring home to the public the likely consequences of the strikers' action. The Central Press Unit would therefore need to be activated at an early stage. There has already been one (inaccurate) press report about the Government's plans to use troops in the event of a water strike (Daily Mail of 7 January). This has not led to any requests for comment but Government spokesmen have agreed the line to be taken in answer to questions will be 'negotiations are proceeding and there have been no requests to date from the water authorities for Government assistance'.

CONCLUSION

11. Since serious industrial action is unlikely before the end of the month, there is no action that need be taken yet on the contingency planning front. If contingency plans did have to be brought into operation they would at best extend national endurance only from 2 to 6 weeks. Even that would depend crucially on the attitude of supervising staff. This is likely to be influenced by complex inter-union relationships. The consensus view within the industry's management is that, while there is a strong tradition of service amongst supervising staff, their co-operation in the event of official action cannot be taken for granted.

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