

Authority of Government Policy Group

Minutes of the meeting held in Lord Carrington's room at the House of Lords on Tuesday, 9th December 1975.

Present: Lord Carrington (in the Chair),
Lord Jellicoe, Mr. John Peyton,
Hon. George Younger, Hon. William Waldegrave,
Mr. Jonathan Sumption, and
Mr. Nigel Forman (Secretary)

Apologies: Mr. Gilmour, Mr. Hardy

Lord Carrington welcomed to the meeting Mr. H.F. Cotterell, General Manager of the Bristol Waterworks Company.

1. Mr. Cotterell on the Water Supply Industry

Mr. Cotterell began by saying that the Water Supply industry had been very fortunate so far in avoiding industrial action. However, it had been affected in the past in an indirect way by industrial action in the electricity supply industry. His own organisation, the Bristol Waterworks Company, had to supply 963,000 people in an area of 920 square miles with 150 reservoirs and 134 pumping stations, 22 of which were important ones. His installations had been electrified during the years immediately after the war and they did not have any significant stand-by generation capacity. The one precaution they had taken was to introduce dual feeds to each station so that they could draw electricity from different parts of the grid in an emergency. If there was a total electricity failure, his installations would need an enormous back-up facility far greater than the 20 stand-by generators that they had at present.

His company employed 380 manual workers in a GMWU closed shop and about the same number of non-manual workers. In the event of a strike in his company, the management would probably be faced with a one out all out situation among the manual workers and the only way of coping adequately with such a situation would be to be able to call upon a floating pool of at least 30 manual workers throughout the company's area. Even then much would depend in an emergency on the transport situation and on the number and scale of any water pipes which became fractured or needed repair. With the assistance of about 30 of the non-manual staff on top of that, it should be possible to keep a minimum service going.

In an emergency he would set up a special committee as soon as necessary and would expect to be allowed by the Government to reduce his commitments on water treatment standards e.g. non-essentials from the public health point of view like water softening. Such water as could be put into the public supply would be directed to human consumption. Most of the water treatment was done by automatic plant which could run unattended for quite some time. However, about a third in his company was still done by the old fashioned method of slow sand filtration which needed manual labour. Just as the modern treatment plant was becoming more and more sophisticated so even the non-manual staff were becoming more and more unionised. Only about 80 or 90 out of 380 working for his company in the latter category were still non-unionised. Since they only employed about 36-40 engineers in the normal way of things, the 30 or so who would be needed in an emergency represented a high proportion of them. Since his company also had to employ a significant number of administrators to handle the paperwork side, some of the senior managers would probably be needed to handle this side of things in an emergency. However, after a period of crash training, some of them could probably be switched into emergency manual jobs as well. In circumstances of militant industrial action, the management would need to be able to count on at least 6 key individuals to train and supervise the remainder who defied the strike. With the modern treatment plant, it was really only a question of learning to press the right buttons.

The Bristol Waterworks Company was fairly typical of other water companies in this country. It supplied a total of 70 million gallons a day, representing something under 1 per cent of the nation's water supplies. The two greatest limiting factors in an emergency would be loss of electricity supply and complete withdrawal of labour by the company's own manual workers. There was unlikely to be any difficulty for months with the supply of treatment chemicals, since these were stored throughout the area. But it was doubtful whether the company would be able to avoid shutting off fractured or damaged mains if there was no co-operation from any of the manual staff.

In answer to further questioning from members of the Group, Mr. Cotterell made the following points:

- In the event of a complete loss of electricity from the grid, his company would not have enough power from stand-by generators etc. to keep its major stations going. For example, one of the new plants at Purton needed 1,000/1,200 kVA (kilovolt amps) to maintain full operation and this was a lot of electricity.

- Measures could also be taken to reduce water demand in an emergency: (a) by encouraging people to use substantially less - at present people in Britain consume an average of 45 gallons per person per day - and (b) by reducing the pressure in the mains to about 50 ft per minute which was well below normal pressures.

- Naturally, water authorities would have to draw up a list of priority customers in the event of an emergency. This would mean giving domestic consumers priority over industrial consumers, and people on kidney machines, hospitals, dairies, bakeries, fire stations, sewage treatment plants, and the like priority even over the majority of domestic consumers. In the past - and notably in 1972 - the unions had co-operated in seeing that water supplies reached such essential consumers. It was not so certain that they would in the future.

- Vulnerability to picketing could be a problem, since some spare parts were stored on a divisional basis throughout the water area and picketing could therefore prevent necessary repairs to mains etc. Perhaps the public health implications had constrained the unions in previous cases of industrial action.

- In an emergency public relations by the water authorities obviously had a part to play, in that they would need to encourage their users to use the minimum in their homes etc. i.e. no car washing, no hosing the garden and fewer baths.

- The lack of stand-by generating capacity to cope with a loss of electricity supply all boiled down to lack of time and money. It might be advisable for the Government to build up a considerable capacity of mobile emergency generation equipment.

- So far it appeared that no efforts had been made to subvert the water supply industry, but management was concerned at NALGO's increasing efforts to get the non-manual workers in the industry unionised on a closed shop basis. In his company 4 or 5 of the non-manual workers would almost certainly be prepared to strike break in a crisis, but he could not speak for the other 28 Statutory Water Authorities, still less for the new Regional Water Authorities.

- Whereas 45 gallons per head per day was the normal consumption of water in this country, people could get by in an emergency perfectly adequately on about 12 gallons per house per day, with water coming from lorries and standpipes.

- Other water authorities had similar knowledge and had made similar preparations for an emergency. In January 1975 the Department of the Environment had asked all water authorities to consider the consequences of industrial action in the water supply industry.

Mr. Younger, concluded the discussion by warmly thanking Mr. Cotterell for his attendance.

2. Next Meeting

After making subsequent enquiries among members of the Group, this was set for Tuesday, 16th December at 11.30 a.m. in Lord Carrington's room. It was agreed that the Group should conduct a general round-up of its work so far.

Conservative Research Department,
24 Old Queen Street,
London S.W.1.

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