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MR INGHAM

cc Mr Lankester
Mr Wolfson

Water Workers' Dispute

Main points from yesterday's meeting of the Contingency Unit, chaired by Mr. Whitelaw:-

Prospects for Industrial Action

Mr King said it was "far from clear" whether the water workers thought they were voting for immediate industrial action or for tough further negotiations. The consensus was that industrial action could take place very soon after 3 February, but that the unions would be concerned to avoid public hostility and would probably not go for an all out strike. But Mr. Jenkin pointed out that the consequences of even limited action would be to put large numbers at an immense risk.

Contingency Arrangements

It was decided not to shorten servicemen's notice for the contingency operation at this stage, but the unit will probably meet again next week to look at it again. Although the servicemen require seven days' notice, it is expected that the result of industrial action would be a progressive deterioration of the water service, not sudden cut offs. But there remain huge gaps in the ability of the contingency plan to cope with a strike, most notably in the fact that capacity does not exist to provide fresh water supplies on anything other than a very limited basis in the event of pipes bursting and requiring the mains to be turned off.

Retired Supervisors

Mr. Whitelaw instructed that an effort be made to establish whether the retired supervisors whose names were held on water authorities pension lists would come to the assistance of the servicemen.

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Public Relations Issues

There was an argument about the desirability of the list of priority consumers, and it was agreed not to publish it. It was also agreed to leave the economy campaign in the hands of the National Water Council (I think the economy campaign is silly: until the water supply breaks down there is no need for economy, and after it breaks down the consumers will not need to be told to economise their consumption).

J. M. M. VEREKER

23 January 1981

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