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THE RIVER MERSEY INITIATIVE

You may recall that this was among the initiatives which Michael Heseltine drew to your attention at the end of 1982. Since then, with the help of a major DOE conference last year, public interest has continued strongly - and indeed has drawn in the European Community.

I have reviewed the Initiative against the latest public expenditure background, and remain convinced of its cumulative benefits and long-term potential - however carefully it will have to be paced. The linking together of water quality improvements with enhanced use of the land alongside the watercourses, throughout the Mersey basin, should give a significant boost to jobs and living conditions across the most urbanised part of the North West. In addition, there is scope for considerable European aid for a campaign of this kind.

You may like to see the text of a statement I will be making in Manchester today, moving the initiative into its next phase. I am sending copies also to colleagues with particular departmental interests - Norman Tebbit, Michael Jopling, and Tom King (who chaired the Mersey Conference last year) - and to Peter Rees at the Treasury.

Among the many bodies supporting the Initiative, the CBI have been the most guarded. They have made clear their backing in principle, but are understandably sensitive about the



pace of the campaign as it bears on the costs to industry. This will be very much a matter for consultation and negotiation as the work evolves, and my statement brings this out. However, I am writing to the CBI Director-General to reassure him on his point.

Dunca
(Private Secretary)

P J

(Approved by the Secretary of State
and signed in his absence)

16 March 1984

MERSEY INITIATIVE

Patrick Jenkin, Secretary of State for the Environment, announced today that he is establishing a campaign organisation to carry forward the Mersey Clean-Up Initiative. Speaking at a Press Conference in Manchester he said:

"The River Mersey ^{and} ~~of~~ its tributaries are among the most polluted rivers in Europe. Over the years, the life of the region has turned its back on this great river system. It could be one of the region's finest assets; it has become one of its greatest liabilities.

Michael Heseltine saw this as a great new opportunity. We need to clean up the quality of the water. We need new water-side development schemes. We need new recreational and amenity projects. The river system - its tributaries, its main water-courses and the Mersey estuary itself - should become a focus for the towns and countryside through which they pass.

There is a huge job to be done before we can begin to enjoy a full network of attractive riverside walks past handsome waterfront buildings and landscaped open spaces; before we can count canoes and sailing dingys using these waters freely; and watch kingfishers over rivers long deserted by wildlife.

Modern industry and polluted rivers do not go well together. Raw, untreated sewage is a smelly neighbour. Water skiing lacks some of its attraction if the skier's equipment has to include a stomach pump.

In 1982 Michael Heseltine published "Cleaning Up the Mersey". This went to a wide range of local people and organisations for consultation. Last year Tom King chaired the Mersey Conference at Daresbury. Over 200 people attended the conference and heard speakers from the Water Authority, from the local authorities and from many other bodies.

The enthusiasm was high but it was also realistic. Yes, we face a long difficult haul. Yes, it will require resources - money, people and commitment. And yes, there are arguments about the pace of the programme.

But three clear messages emerged. We need a radical clean up campaign. We need a new non-statutory body to run it. And we need the Department of the Environment to take the lead.

Last Autumn the North West Water Authority - who have the key role to play - published its own consultation paper on water quality, setting the Mersey initiative against the needs of the whole region. And only last month the Tenth Report of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution gave its firm backing to the Initiative.

We must now move forward. Today I am announcing the establishment of a campaign organisation.

This will be a non-statutory body with 3 component parts. We want to involve as many groups and organisations as possible. Therefore we will set up a Representative Conference headed by an independent chairman from the region whom I intend to invite to take the lead. I am already consulting on possible names. The conference would meet, I envisage, in full session every one or two years; it would receive progress reports; and it would maintain the momentum of the clean-up campaign.

The direction of the campaign would be in the hands of a board of professional officers under the chairmanship of the DOE regional director. David Renshaw will thus become the first Chairman of the Board. He will be supported by a small but strong team in the DOE regional office which I hope will include people seconded from outside the Department to bring particular skills and expertise.

And then there will be three project groups to cover the three main divisions of the Mersey basin: the estuary; mid-Mersey and Southern; and the upper catchment. These project groups will, as far as possible, be built on the existing teams.

The actual work will be done by a wide range of bodies and people: public sector and private sector, statutory and non- statutory, commercial firms, voluntary bodies and local groups of enthusiasts. Obviously the local authorities will play a leading part, as will the North West Water Authority. So I hope will the Countryside Commission and the Sports Council.

Where will the money come from?

At the heart of the campaign will be investment in water quality. Much the greater part of this must come from the North West Water Authority, and that is why their Chairman George Mann is on the platform here with me today. The Authority's £170m programme to improve the Mersey Estuary is already well under way. Their strategy document proposed spending £3,700m over 25 years in water quality improvement throughout the North West; the Government supports the authority's long term aims in principle. We shall give the authority a high priority when allocating external finance - with a strong but certainly not exclusive concentration on the Mersey basin. Higher standards must inevitably mean higher charges - there is no escaping this. But it is not part of our policy to impose unacceptable costs on the Authority's customers. There is a trade off between the pace of change and the increase in charges.

The private sector, too, must work in partnership with the Water Authority. An excellent start is the 50% contribution which Shell are making to the extension of the Ellesmere Port Sewage Treatment Works.

Then there is what happens on land. Improved water quality will increase the opportunities and incentives for waterside redevelopment and improvement schemes. Private companies, voluntary bodies, local authorities, the Countryside Commission, the Sports Council all have a role to play. The Department can help with derelict land grants and with the Urban Programme. In making grants I shall want to give priority wherever possible to projects which contribute to the clean-up campaign.

We can look for help from the European Community. Already Community funds are supporting the water authorities' sewage treatment programme in the assisted areas. The European Commission has shown a great interest in the Mersey clean-up campaign and the Government will fight hard for the greatest possible commitment from the European Regional Development Fund.

Next question: how long will it take?

The answer - certainly not less than 25 years. The scale of the problem is enormous. We are coming to grips with the dereliction and pollution of centuries. I liken the task to that of the great medieval architects who set out to build the cathedrals which they themselves

would never see finished, but which are part of the glory of Britain today.

We must think long and we must think big. The prize is beyond price. It means new jobs particularly in the construction industry. It is also a new opportunity to harness the commitment of the young to the improvement of our environment; it is a chance to get clean water, pleasant surroundings and new opportunities for leisure. Where there is today squalor and stench, we can bring back the beauty of nature.

The time to act is now.

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