

Local Govt

PRIME MINISTER

Mr R Butler

WATER STRIKE - REGIONAL PRESENTATION

I asked the COI last night to let me have by lunch today their impressions of the regional coverage of the water strike so far. The outcome is dispiriting.

Their reports show overwhelmingly that local coverage is concentrating on the effects; that the employers have not widened their comments to encompass the causes of the dispute or to promote acceptance of the results of mediation; and that the trade unions are the more active.

The outstanding exception is in the North West. George Mann, chairman of the NW Water Authority, is reported as explaining the award and advocating its acceptance on Radio Lancashire and on other stations in Preston, Merseyside (two stations) and Manchester (two stations); and planning to give interviews to the Manchester Evening News; BBC Regional TV; Border TV; and Radio Cumbria and Radio Newcastle.

This workload is positively heroic compared with that of other Regional Water Authority leaders.

Extracts from reports of other regions are as follows:

North East

"Spokesmen for the Northumbrian Water Authority have been asked to comment in most cases and have sought to reassure consumers, give advice on any special arrangements being made and appeal for water to be used sparingly. Denials of some union claims on the effects of the strike have also been made - They have either not been asked, or not sought, to widen the scope of their comments to encompass the causes of the dispute or the reasons for its continuation."

London and South East

"Media coverage has largely concentrated on the physical effects of the strike Statements from Thames and Southern Water Authority officials have been confined to such factual advice as the need to conserve supplies and to boil water in certain districts."

Yorkshire and Humberside

"Yorkshire and Humberside media have concentrated almost exclusively on the likely effects of the water strike on consumers and advice to householders on how to cope. There has been very little comment on the terms or acceptability of the pay offer."

"Nothing has emanated from YWA to promote acceptance of the pay offer except for publication of the NWC sponsored-ad on water supplies for the home and industry."

South West

"Local media coverage since the strike started five days ago appears to have been concentrated on 'round-up' reports on how various communities are coping with particular emphasis on any major problems such as blocked purification plants both Water Authorities have been prominently quoted in relation to these matters but do not appear to be commenting to any great degree on the Water Council's current pay offer. The Water Authorities seem to be adopting a 'low key' approach, possibly because they are not anxious to exacerbate the situation."

East

"On the evidence of newspapers arriving today there is no sign of any PR exercise to convince staff or the public of the adequacy of the offer. The lack of effort appears to apply equally on television and radio."

In spite of this lack of regional effort, newspaper opinion tends to be weighted against the unions, and in favour of the award and an end to the strike. But there is some criticism on the handling of the negotiations.

Interestingly, a Coventry (Massey Ferguson) trade union leader is quoted as saying the strike "is totally immoral".

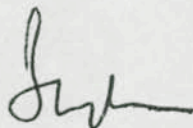
The lessons from all this are:

1. the water authorities need bullying into doing their job as employers; and

2. Ministers and Backbenchers cannot afford to relax their efforts.

I shall get another report from the COI on Monday.

I am copying this to the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Environment.



B. INGHAM

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