

PRIME MINISTER

cc Mr Ingham
Mr Mount

WATER STRIKE MEETING, 15 FEBRUARY

(i) Situation Report (Mr King and Mr Edwards)

I think you will want to cover:

- (a) Properties on standpipes, and numbers advised to boil. (A substantial increase in the Thames Area as leaking mains are turned off.)
- (b) Occupations of water authority premises;
- (c) What might be the impact of an EEPTU/AUEW decision to advise craftsmen not to cross picket lines, which is likely to be the case from next Sunday.
- (d) Implications of the decision of local authority manuals to reject their 4½% pay offer. (The GMWU and TGWU, who together command 21 out of 30 votes on the union side of LACSAB, voted against; NUPE voted by 2-1 to accept, but command only 9 votes. The unions have asked for an early meeting with LACSAB and will no doubt seek an increased offer: we do not know whether they are inclined to co-ordinate industrial action with the water workers.)

(ii) The Negotiations (Mr King and Mr Tebbit)

You will want a progress report on:

- (a) The search for a formula which would make binding the outcome of any further arbitration/inquiry. (Opening yesterday's debate - in which both Mr Kaufman and Mr King made low key and generally conciliatory speeches, stressing the opportunities for resolving the dispute -

Mr Kaufman said that having spoken to "all the parties" he had reason to suppose that the unions were willing to go to a Committee of Inquiry "without preconditions", and that they had given "assurances committing themselves to resolution of the dispute by this process".)

(b) Possible names for the arbitrator or Chairman; and

(c) Terms of reference, and the extent to which they can be rooted in the Buchanan report.

(iii) Current Issues

You may want to discuss:

(a) Your concern about the legal position. Mr King can report his legal advice on the use of contractors and the statutory position of the water authorities;

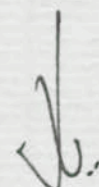
(b) Mr Tebbit's proposal that selected RWA's be encouraged to invite employees to return to work. When will be the right moment? What are the implications for the closed shop agreement? What would be regarded as a successful response and how can we be sure of it? Would a management ballot help? Is this a good moment for the employers to break an agreement?

(iv) CCU Activity

(v) Presentation (Mr Ingham)

(a) Assessment of Monday's events, notably the debate;

(b) Line to take with the Lobby, and at Question Time.


14 February 1983

TOM KING (SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT) ✓

Transcript from BBC Radio 4, The World At 1. 11 February 1983.

PRESENTER: BRIAN WIDLAKE. And first, the water strike which shows no sign of coming to an end. Meanwhile, in Wales, farmers are said to be becoming desperate in their search for water for their animals and, in Birmingham, water-users apparently face dire consequences because of a massive leak in a major pipeline.

In the Commons yesterday, the Environment Secretary, Tom King, in answer to a question on the use of troops to maintain essential water supplies, replied (and I quote): there is no question that the Government will stand idly by if there's a serious risk to health or to the life of the community. If that were the case, any Government should take steps to see that essential services were maintained. I put it to Mr King that this would mean the use of troops.

KING: Well only as a very last resort. We very much hope - and, as I said in that answer - that, actually, people will reconsider the position because there is a signed agreement as to how this dispute can be settled sensibly, and that involves having, now - whether it's arbitration or some form of tribunal which is in their National Agreement - with both sides agreeing to accept the findings of that Tribunal.

WIDLAKE: Is the Civil Contingencies Unit fully prepared to activate a plan involving the use of troops should it be necessary?

KING: Well there's always a plan in the background because any Government has to be ready for any emergencies, even when normal working is taking place. If we get very heavy snowfalls, if we get bad flooding, as you know, there could be an emergency situation and so there are always emergency plans ready to help people if they are in real distress.

WIDLAKE: Regie Prentice also mentioned the use of private contractors, yesterday, in his question to you in the House.

Is that a possibility?

KING: Well it's happening, now, in certain places because some mending of pipes is done, under normal conditions, by private contractors and so it's not the sort of absolute change in the situation. And, in other cases, they may have been used for particular emergency situations but these are things which, obviously, are possibilities. I'm much more interested in seeing it resolved on a proper basis because the lads involved, themselves, are now losing quite significant sums of money; I want to see them back at work at the earliest time, and I want to see the distress that's caused, at the moment, ended at the earliest possible time: and could I just say this. I think, actually, that there are some signs that this could be achieved. I asked, yesterday, for people to reconsider their position and to abide by the agreement that they signed and I'm not unhopeful that we can actually achieve this.

WIDLAKE: On this programme yesterday, Sir Robert Marshall, a former boss of the water industry, criticised the Government for its unhelpful intervention in the dispute. He said the employers - and he spoke from experience, of course - are told at one moment, you're on your own, do what you think best in the public interest; then, the next moment, the Government is saying don't you dare?

KING: Yes, well, Sir Robert has been in the public service for a long time. He's sat on the other side of the table and I've no doubt, at times, has found himself in just that situation as a senior Civil Servant - actually in my Department he was a senior Civil Servant - and so I think he's actually pretty well aware of some of the problems and difficulties that Government has to face and that the industries themselves have to face: and one has to try, as fairly as one can, to strike the right balance.

put our case fairly and we will agree to accept the findings.

WIDLAK: Environment Secretary, Tom King.