

# KICKING A STINK IN RIVER WATER

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### **Water as a common good?**

Water might seem like a common good, heaven-sent, but both its holding infrastructure and its delivery need to be paid for in some way. Everybody needs water, demand for it is high, and its infrastructure and delivery is therefore a complex big business. Today, in the main, highly capitalised corporations do this work, employing people, providing services and shareholder value. Big corporations generally like to know what the rules are, and generally work within them. Governments regulate the corporations, setting the rules of engagement. Water falls into the utility sector of corporations, whose job it is to provide basic services (stuff we can't be expected to do without - electricity is another utility). In the UK, utilities are run, in the main, by private institutions but are public services. As such, they expect to be strongly regulated, through legislation and enforcement from government.

### **Water is a fluid good**

Water is fluid, many things at once. It is what we are mostly made up of (and what we drink is to top up what we lose, mostly in everyday metabolism and excretion). It is a transactional medium (we use it to wash clothes in, to cook food in, to maintain personal hygiene). It is also a medium we interface with for purposes of leisure, sport, aesthetics, and physical and mental health (being on it, in it, or by it, is health-enhancing).

### **Water corps**

The water corporations mostly deliver on steady but unexciting profitability to their investors, and on clean water and efficient sewage disposal to their customers and consumers. Nature and biodiversity in general need clean water to survive and thrive, so water-related environmental issues are also within their remit, at the very least implicitly. There is growing demand in the UK of river-use for leisure, sport, and for physical and mental health more widely, and this creates new demands of these providers. Regulating the rivers so that they are fit to swim in requires higher standards than regulating rivers so that they can be gazed upon. There are also changes to climate which influence how rivers are managed. Overall rainfall in the UK has risen by nearly ten percent since the 1960s, together with more extreme rainfall patterns. Many corporations are struggling with maintaining their core services and shareholder value while at the same time recognising the need to modernise infrastructure in response to these new demands – of rivers clean enough to swim in, and infrastructure that is climate-change ready. Some corporations currently act illegally, disposing of raw sewage in inland waters beyond the allowances set by the regulators. That they incur significant fines on a regular basis is testimony to this,

Although it beggars belief that they should be allowed to dispose of raw sewage in this way at all. If they attempt to conceal or under-report these releases of sewage, then the fines can be much larger. However, damage to the environment may have already been done, while the Governmental regulatory body policing such discharges, the Environment Agency, is hard-pushed to do its work as effectively as it would like because of a shortage of resources to do so. Just recently, the Environment Agency instructed its workforce to focus only on more serious pollution releases, because they don't have the resources to operate more comprehensively. The water corporations need help to do their job properly through appropriately stringent regulation and the enforcement of such regulation. They understand, I think, the need for extensive capital investment in water infrastructure, but

have difficulty explaining it to shareholders and investors. Legislation for improvement would reduce this task and incentivise water corporations towards virtue.

### **Water capital**

Capital investment in water infrastructure needs to be the most extensive since Victorian times, which is when serious investment in water services in the UK began. The Houses of Parliament sit by the River Thames, in a majestic setting. The Tower of London too, and Windsor Castle. The Great Stink of 1858 brought the filth and contamination of the Thames home to Parliament, with the smell of human and industrial waste sickening politicians and making them aware on a daily basis that death and disease were close-by and in the river. Across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, prior to The Great Stink, London had grown in population, had industrialised, and there was no major system of management of pollution and sewage beyond putting it in the river and letting it flow out to into the ocean. It took a crisis of death and disease to bring home the message that new water infrastructure for new times was required. Much changed in the decades that followed The Great Stink – with huge capital investment in sewage disposal and water management, London moved to becoming a clean and healthy city.

### **A second Great Stink**

I believe we are at a similar time now, in the middle of a second Great Stink. People are not dying of water-borne diseases as in the nineteenth century, but the current pandemic has led people in droves to take to the rivers to swim, for solace and companionship, but especially for physical and mental health. The pandemic will hopefully recede, but there is now a global crisis in mental health, in large part related to the pandemic. This second Great Stink has mental health at stake, at a time when again the rivers are being used for sewage disposal as existing, often Victorian, infrastructure is unable to cope with the demand for proper disposal. It is reasonable to put rivers to greater use – everybody benefits from this common good – but the rivers need to be fit for purpose. To learn now that the rivers are again being used as open sewers, that they are not fit for human use, for health, physical and mental – well, it makes me want to kick up a stink.

### **A New Dawn?**

How to do it though? Water is a monopoly industry in the UK – I can't change my water provider if I am unhappy with the service I am getting. There is no equivalent of 'fair-trade' chocolate, if I am unhappy for moral and ethical reasons with my water provider. There should be a way of making water companies more accountable within the free-market, so that users can vote with their wallets if they are unhappy with their provider's track record on pollution. If customers and consumers can't move their money to another provider when their water company fails to deliver clean water throughout the system, including rivers, what choices do they have?

There are three main ways in which people can have influence here. The first is through voting and making the issue known to local Members of Parliament (MP) – to write to them to let them know how they feel about raw sewage-dumping in the river. The second is through groups that represent this issue. Whether local or national, people can choose according to preference. Nationally and locally, The Rivers Trust, an environmental charity

and umbrella organisation for regional member-trusts across the UK and Ireland, is doing important work in raising the profile of this issue and making representations to Parliament and elsewhere. There are several other groups. I don't believe anyone, whether in parliament, in water corporations, or in everyday life, wants river pollution to happen, but I think there are too many cogs in the machine to make it a straightforward issue. You might be lucky and have an MP that likes rivers, even luckier if they like outdoor swimming. Just this week, Conservative MP Matt Hancock took an impromptu dip at the Serpentine Swimming Club, as a non-member breaking the rules and upsetting many members of the club. I could forgive his act if he were to become a champion for clean inland waters. The third way is through activism – protests and demonstrations. The media, especially those that like to tell truth to power, are open to this. But protesting against something should carry behind it a sense of what better world would be created if this particular act – raw sewage dumping – were to stop. I believe that river swimming helps people be much better versions of themselves, and that is enough for me. The corporations might like it too - cleaner river water could help companies win favour with the regulators in ways that enhance their profitability as well as their image as being forward-looking – being better versions of themselves. A flow, an ecosystem, of government, business and user. A virtuous cycle of clean river water and people who are made better through its delivery and use – what could be nicer?

Maybe a small piece of cake as well.



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