

New UK legislation means the poor will pay more for water

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Having announced 'no compulsory metering' only last month, the British Labour government is rushing through legislation in the Water Industry Bill that will introduce widespread water metering. Metering will fall particularly hard on the poorest families and those with special needs, such as people on dialysis, the incontinent and those with dirty jobs.

The government is justifying the legislation on the basis of 'consumer choice' and 'matching demand and supply' in areas of scarce water resources. At present, most households pay for water and sewerage services on an unmeasured basis, linked on a sliding scale to the value of their homes. This reflects that fact that until 1974 services were largely funded from a now defunct property-based system of local taxation.

Presently, some 12 percent of UK households are metered. In Bradford, Yorkshire the water bills of those on meters is up to four times that of their unmetered neighbours. A study by Oldham Council into the effects of water metering on poorer families found: 'Just over 20 percent of those with metered supply paid more than £225 as compared to less than 1 percent of households who were charged according to their rateable [property] value ... [as a result of metering] over half of all households (57 percent) are flushing toilets less, over two fifths (42 percent) are washing dishes less, over a third are washing clothes less, nearly two fifths are bathing less and a third (34 percent) are sharing bath water.'

Even a report by the previous Conservative government admitted: 'A significant number of people put themselves through a marked, definite, in some cases severe, change of lifestyle with the aim of managing their water bills.'

Labour's bill states:

* there will be 'no compulsory metering';

* households will continue to pay on an unmeasured basis while they remained in their present homes;

* meters will be fitted when there is a change of ownership;

* households that use water for garden watering and swimming pools will have to be metered for both essential and non-essential usage;

* consumers have the right to choose to be metered;

* meters will be installed free of charge.

While more affluent consumers living in high valued properties will opt for metering and see their bills fall, even if they use garden sprinklers, poor families living in low value properties will face a steep increase in their bills and have to cut back on water.

Those with special needs face the humiliation of registering to pay on an unmeasured basis. There are 6.5 million disabled people, many of whom have medical conditions requiring higher than average use of water for washing or bathing. About 1million adults suffer from incontinence.

'No compulsory metering' is duplicitous. It heralds widespread metering in the same way that 'no compulsory redundancies' saw widespread job losses. It ensures that there will be a stampede to metering, as the better-off seek to take advantage of lower bills at the expense of those who remain without meters. As people move home and old estates are renovated, metering will increase.

The water regulator, the industry, the Labour government and the Environment Agency justify metering on the grounds that demand for water has escalated and resources are scarce. But this assertion needs further investigation. The domestic consumption component of the Public Water Supply has risen from 87 litres a day in 1961 to 147 in 1995. Consumption rose as homes were fitted with indoor toilets, baths and

washing machines. Toilet flushing is the largest single component of household demand. Yet Britain still has the lowest per capita consumption in the industrial world, including those countries where water is metered.

Furthermore, essential domestic demand is not set to rise significantly, as all the public agencies admit. The Public Water Supply (PWS) has remained static since the mid 1980s. But the PWS accounts for only half of annual usage. Industry, power stations, agriculture, irrigation and fish farming use the remainder at a lower price that covers only administrative costs.

In an earlier period, as the needs of industry grew, the private water abstractors took the first slice of the cake. It was always the publicly-owned PWS and the public purse that bore the burden of adjustment and built reservoirs to meet demand. Since the 1970s, any increase in demand was met on the cheap by increased abstractions from rivers and groundwater sources, depleting resources. At the same time, the quality of many rivers deteriorated as trade effluent and domestic sewage were returned inadequately or untreated into the rivers.

This was accompanied by a scandalous neglect of the underground network that allowed leaking water mains to waste more than 30 percent of water put into the supply. When the water industry was privatised under the Tory government, prices were set to cover the cost of leakage control. Now consumers could be asked to pay again for leakage reduction. There have been several incidences in which foul water has leaked out of cracked sewers, contaminating groundwater and threatening public health. Residents in West Hertfordshire fell ill with cryptosporidiosis because of this.

Since privatisation, the snail-like pace of the renewal of the underground network means that if this continued, it would take more than a century to replace old water mains and more than five centuries to replace the critical sewers.

The real object of charging for water and sewerage services on a volumetric basis is to provide a new mechanism for keeping prices and profits high. Since charging for essential services, in a way that discriminates against the poor in favour of the more affluent, cannot be justified on its own terms, all the public agencies declare that their purpose is to 'save the

environment' and ensure 'sustainable development'.

Insofar as there is a 'water shortage', it is being driven not by essential domestic use but by the needs of private abstractors and the water companies' refusal to manage supply efficiently. It is compounded by the lack of resource planning by the Environment Agency, as a result of privatisation.

However, the measures to overcome the problem focus on the domestic consumers, rather than a range of possible measures that resolve the problem at source: careful planning and management of resources, leakage control and appliance modification.

Once again, Labour's policy is being dictated by the requirements of big business. Responsibility for the problems created by commercial enterprise is being pushed onto the backs of working people, leaving industry, and the agencies charged with their regulation, free to operate in ways that will both exacerbate the inequalities in health and the 'water shortage'.

See Also:

Report finds UK health inequalities have widened significantly

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