The summer floods in Britain: Outmoded and decayed social infrastructure exposed

Robert Stevens
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Severe flooding in Britain has produced an ongoing national crisis, with tens of thousands of people seeing their homes ruined.

Many have been left without clean drinking water and electricity. Thousands of people have been forced to evacuate their homes and be accommodated in emergency shelters, as flood waters rose to levels of up to 6 feet. The Royal Air Force mounted its biggest-ever peacetime operation, with six Sea King helicopters rescuing up to 120 people in life-threatening situations.

Despite warnings of further heavy rainfall following the June floods in which large parts of Yorkshire and Humberside were flooded, including Sheffield and Hull, the government made no preparations whilst making token promises to help affected councils with minuscule levels of funding.

On July 21, Prime Minister Gordon Brown claimed that the government had had responded as quickly as possible to the crisis and added that it was "an emergency which no one could have predicted."

Only now, in response to the devastating floods, has the government stated that the flood defence budget will actually increase. It will rise from £600 million to £800 million a year but not until 2010-2011. The increase follows years of underfunding and cuts in the flood-defence budget. It is a sop that cannot hope to address the problem of building new flood defences and bringing older ones up to the standard required.

This week, Brown announced that the government would make £46 million available to those in need in flood-hit areas. He added that the government would also cover 100 percent of the costs incurred by local authorities due to the floods. The government figure contrasts starkly with the estimates of the Association of British Insurers, who have stated that the total costs for the damage caused by the June and July floods could reach more than £2 billion.

The initial amount offered to the victims of the June floods was just £14 million. In Hull alone, the council had already pledged £18 million for home repairs and estimated that the cost of flood damage to some 10,500 homes could total up to £200 million.

From July 17, further flooding occurred in the North and West of England including Tenbury Wells in Worcestershire, which was flooded for the second time in three weeks. The following day, areas of Filey in North Yorkshire were left under 3 feet of water.

On 19 July, flash flooding occurred in Cumbria, North Yorkshire and County Durham. Over the weekend of July 20-21, the flooding extended to the South and West of England due to an active frontal weather system moving over southern parts of the country.

There was heavy flooding in towns and villages throughout Gloucestershire, Worcestershire, Warwickshire, Wiltshire, Oxfordshire, Berkshire, London and South Wales. Some areas received a month's rainfall in 24 hours, while Swindon in Wiltshire received a month's rainfall in less than half a day.

Town and villages alongside rivers that had burst their banks were flooded, including the town centres of Reading, Newbury and Maidenhead. In South Wales, Barry saw severe flooding. London was badly affected, with areas of South West London under two feet of water. A reported 40,000 sandbags were sent from Lincolnshire in an attempt to prevent flooding in Abingdon and Oxford.

Some of the most severe flooding occurred in Gloucestershire. Tewkesbury was badly hit, and a nearby water treatment plant was flooded. This exacerbated an already critical situation, as the Tewkesbury Mythe Water Treatment Works had already been flooded, leading to 150,000 homes losing their water supply.

Within hours, the Severn Trent Water company announced that Tewkesbury, Cheltenham and Gloucester would run out of clean drinking water. Bottles of drinking water were airlifted in to communities over a large area of England. Gloucestershire is now being supplied with giant "bowser" water tankers and a daily delivery of 3 million bottles of water by the British Army from a base at Cheltenham racecourse.

Tens of thousands of people also lost their electricity supply in Gloucestershire, when the Castlemeads substation was turned off because of rising floodwater. The crisis would have been even greater had flooding resulted in the shutdown of the Walham electricity substation in Gloucester that supplies half a million people. It is protected by a dam, and floodwater levels reached to within 2 inches of the top before peaking. Water pumps were kept running through the night and a 1-kilometre wall was built around the site to stop water flowing through.

On July 23, the River Thames had become so swollen that an estimated 90,000 gallons of water a second was moving towards Oxford, Reading and Windsor. Parts of the county of Warwickshire were also flooded, with Shakespeare's birthplace Stratford-Upon-Avon being flooded up to level of 3 feet in some areas. Performances by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Swan Theatre were cancelled due to the basement of the building being flooded.

Many other villages along the River Avon were deluged by floods, while roads in south Warwickshire were cut off.

By July 25, floodwaters from the tributaries of the Thames had reached parts of the historic university town of Oxford, forcing people to evacuate 250 homes overnight. An emergency centre was set up at the Kassam Football stadium, with 35 people having to be moved by inflatable dingy to the stadium. At one stage, the floodwaters of up to 4 feet moved to within a mile of some university buildings. As of July 26, some 340,000 people were still without fresh water in the Gloucester area, with another 300 households without electricity. Severn Trent Water stated that it might take up to two weeks for them to restore supplies.

The same day, two men, 64-year-old Bram Lane and his son Chris, died after being overcome by fumes from a petrol-powered pump they were operating in the basement of the flooded Tewkesbury rugby club. The fatalities bring the death toll caused by the summer floods to eight.

More flooding is expected, and six severe flood warnings are still in place on the River Severn in Gloucester, Tewkesbury and Worcester, on the Thames around Oxford, and on the Ock, near Abingdon, Oxfordshire.

The flooding severely affected the national transport system, with

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Heathrow Airport in London cancelling 141 flights. Floods also resulted in the closure of the M4 motorway after a landslide left only one eastbound lane passable. Other motorways closed included the M5 in Gloucestershire and Worcestershire. Hundreds of motorists were left stranded in their cars and forced to stay in the vehicles overnight. The M50 near Ledbury was also closed.

Train services to Birmingham, Coventry, Derby and the southwest of the country were also hit by flooding. In South Croydon, two railway lines were closed due to landslips. In London, 25 tube stations were closed and the Underground network severely disrupted

What can account for such a massive crisis? The flooding has revealed the enormous decay in the physical and social infrastructure of Britain. Decades of underinvestment in critical social infrastructure such as that required to build and maintain strong flood defences have resulted in a social catastrophe.

Despite the fact that about 8 percent of the total land area in England (12,000 square km) is at risk from flooding from rivers, tidal rivers and estuaries, successive governments have refused to allocate the necessary resources to flood planning, defence and maintenance.

The Labour government, since coming to power in 1997, has continued where the previous Conservative administration left off in cutting back on essential public works, infrastructure and maintenance programmes.

Maintenance is a critical factor in flood-defence planning. It is estimated that every £1 spent on the maintenance of flood defences saves £6 in the event of damage caused during flooding. According to the Environment Agency chief executive Baroness Young, the amount of funding required this year onwards is at least £1 billion a year—£200 million more than the government has pledged and £400 million more than is presently allocated.

In the spring, Young asked for an extra £150 million a year for the maintenance of flood defences. This request was rejected by the Treasury—then under the control of Gordon Brown.

One of the first acts of the new environment secretary, David Miliband, in May 2006 was to refuse to reverse his predecessor Margaret Beckett's £15 million cut in annual spending on flood defence.

Brown's claim that the floods could not be predicted is a lie. The government received very recent specific warnings about the possible scale of the flooding to come. On July 22, the *Observer* newspaper revealed that the government had been warned months ago that heavy rainfall was expected this summer. In spite of this, the government did nothing to prevent the present calamity. Instead, it pressed ahead with plans to cut back on staffing levels at the Environment Agency. The *Observer* wrote, "Earlier this year, the Met Office and risk planners in Whitehall told ministers that because of the El Nino effect, which changes global weather patterns, this summer would have much wetter weather than usual....

"However, at the same time, the government was planning to cut jobs at the Environment Agency, which deals with the defences."

This week, the Public and Commercial Services Union warned that the government's plans to shed 550 jobs next year in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) will have a highly detrimental impact on its ability to coordinate responses to future floods. Defra is largely responsible for responding to the current floods crisis.

The job cuts will be followed by a year-on-year 5 percent budget cut until 2011. The union said that last year, some of Defra's flood-management policy work was "transferred to the Environment Agency as well as the closure of all their regional offices in places such as, Lincoln, Taunton and Tunbridge Wells. The only remaining office is in York. Cuts have also seen the loss of eight regional engineers in flood management taking the total to four."

As far back as 2001, the National Audit Office (NAO) issued a report warning that a large proportion of flood defences were badly maintained and "inadequate and inconsistent.'' The report was issued in response to the floods in England in 2000 in which 11,000 people were evacuated from their homes or businesses and 10,000 properties flooded.

It found, "Up to two million homes and buildings are in areas at risk of flooding." It also pointed to the results of a condition survey of the Agency's flood defence assets that showed "some 43 percent of structures and 36 percent of linear barriers in England are categorised as only fair, poor or very poor."

Describing changing weather patterns and the likelihood of more rainfall, it noted in its summary, "Over the next 50 years, climate change is expected to lead to changes in rainfall patterns and more unpredictable meteorological conditions and storminess. These would increase the frequency with which existing flood defences are overwhelmed and flooding occurs; and increase the rate at which defences deteriorate."

The NAO released its latest report on June 15 of this year, just days before the beginning of the June floods. Utilising the latest data available, it stated, "Some 2.1 million properties are in flood risk areas, affecting 4.3 million people (8.7 percent of the population). Of these, around 469,000 properties are at significant risk of flooding (affecting 900,000 people)"

Amongst its criticisms of the Environment Agency was that it "has not met its target to maintain 63 percent of flood defence systems in target condition; and the Agency estimates that only 57 percent of all systems and 46 percent of high risk systems, such as those protecting urban areas, are in their target condition, with consequent risks should a flood occur."

The primary factor in the EA being unable to carry out vital flood defence and maintenance is that it is now responsible for far more flood management and maintenance programmes than it was in 2001 and has been forced to carry out its work with a smaller staff. The EA employed a workforce of 1,400 staff in 2005-2006 compared to 1,570 in 2001.

The flooding in the UK in 2007 and its terrible consequences are the result of definite policies pursued by successive Conservative and Labour government in the UK since the late 1970s. The gutting of social welfare programmes, cuts in social spending and the transfer of wealth to a super-rich elite has resulted in situation in which the government cannot and will not even prepare for and deal with the consequences of several days of heavy rainfall.

Privatisation of the water industry has been accompanied by cuts in infrastructure programmes. The majority of Britain's towns and cities, including London, still rely largely on drainage systems built during the Victorian era. These systems were designed for smaller populations, and their upkeep and improvement have been constantly neglected by the privatised water firms. The water companies will not "invest" in activities they deem to be unprofitable, as they answer only to their shareholders and large investors.

This week, it was revealed that Severn Trent Water is on course to post a £300 million profit this year.

On July 23, the *Daily Telegraph* stated, "It is understandable that the victims should cast around for someone to blame. Are the floods the fault of the Environment Agency, or of the planners who decreed that we build on low-lying ground, or of climate change? And there may indeed have been some avoidable errors. Warnings were slow in coming; housing has encrusted the flood plains as the result of overcrowding. But the precipitation is no one's fault. As God demands, a touch sarcastically, of the prophet Job: 'Hath the rain a father?'

"It is a peculiarly modern conceit that we can be wholly in control of our destiny."

What is being denounced as a "modern conceit" is the conception that mankind can utilise the vast resources of the planet in order to build a society along planned and rational lines—the essential requirement revealed by this summer's floods.

Naturally, there are those in the media who are most anxious that no one question the present state of affairs, in which the parasitic layer for whom

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they speak has benefited.

A comment in the July 25 *Times* by Alice Miles summed up the cynical indifference within ruling circles to the suffering of hundreds of thousands that was entirely preventable had the necessary financial resources and social infrastructure been in place.

Miles began by praising the government's response to the flooding crisis and stating, "I hate to intrude on the British love of a disaster, but haven't the emergency services done brilliantly?"

She continued, "As I write, we do not know of anybody who has died as a direct result of the floods. Strenuous work overnight by the military and the fire service saved the power station from flooding.... I suspect that farmers with devastated crops and presumably dead livestock will bear the brunt of the real financial damage. But without in any way demeaning the nuisance and misery caused to hundreds of thousands of people in Central England; if this is a disaster, I am a tomato"

Miles was particularly keen to lavish praise on the Brown government, which she said "has proved itself calmly competent...the pragmatic, unhysterical approach of the new prime minister has suited the country well."

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