

FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON WATER II

By John Dawes

We are running out of fresh water in some parts of England – not that that seems possible given the wet autumn we are experiencing, and the traditional view that the UK is a damp and foggy place!

Perversely, the most densely populated, the most thirsty, the great ‘engine of the economy’ for the whole UK – the South-East – is one of the hardest hit regions, or the least able place to capture enough water for itself. Not that it does not have excellent aquifers, reasonable reservoirs, interlinked river systems for a reducing rainfall: it is just that it consumes, loses and wastes more water than all other regions – with the capital well out front.

And to emphasise the South-East’s privileged position at the top (or bottom!) of the water restrictions league this summer of 2006, more houses and increasing population – for the exploding powerhouse growth – are being mandatory planned by the South East England Regional Assembly (SEERA), the new, unelected, regional assembly body of 112 Councillors based in Guildford who minister lives and livelihoods from Oxford and Milton Keynes down and across to Dover and the Isle of Wight.

There are 8 unelected regional assemblies doing exactly the same things all around England for the sake of consolidating regionalisation of local government in accordance with EU aspirations. In other words, eventually to do away with County Councils, take planning out of Borough hands, and provide collective rule through appointed Regional Chambers set-up to embrace the broader brush issues of local government.

Another long, hot summer 2006.

The Met Office says that this year’s summer has been a record-breaker. Central England Temperature records,

which began in 1659, show that May to September 2006 has been warmer than any equivalent period on record. This summer has also included the warmest ever month (July) and a record September temperature.

In the BBC1 programme *The Great British Summer* in November, Alan Titchmarsh confirmed that the July 36.5°C temperature (hotter than Miami) was the highest ever recorded in England. He added, “In an average year, Kent gets less water per head of population than Egypt. And July 2006 was even drier.”

We must now accept the fact that Southern and Eastern England are semi-arid zones and ‘net rainfall deficit’ should be the watchword for all residents and businesses: profligate use of water has the same damaging effect as mining precious fossil resources. In fact, we need to consider whether garden swimming pools are water consumers or conservers. They collect and save rainwater like a reservoir and can supply garden water in dry conditions, as many keen gardeners will testify. But, public perception is that a swimming pool wastes water.

England stumbles unthinkingly towards a water crisis.

Over the last 30 years, water consumption throughout in England has increased by 70% per person, says CPRE Kent (Campaign to Protect Rural England). Too much water is being taken from groundwater reserves, leading to lower levels in many rivers and drying out of wetland areas, with serious effects on wildlife and the character of the landscape.

Nevertheless, rapid housing development dictated by Government and planned by SEERA is fully underway to sustain ‘the engine of the economy’, the South-East. Over the next 20 years, a

minimum of 600,000 houses (850,000 demanded by developers) are in the pipeline for building across the South-East, with road transport expected to double and air traffic passenger movements to go up nearly threefold.

At their AGM in November, CPRE Kent asked 'Can Kent cope?' They have been finding through their planning application searches that the high level of new builds are not being supported by improving infrastructure.

An Audit Bill put before Parliament for the third time, intended to improve inadequate and failing infrastructure (which is not much of a vote-grabbing exercise at the best of times), was talked out yet again in October by Government minders. They must have other plans in mind!

New builds in SE development areas (e.g. Thames Gateway, Ashford, etc.) include plans to build over 30% of homes within flood plains, such that the swamping of Kent with new estates, seems to mean more about gerrymandering than ensuring the best quality of life.

How *do* you supply water to more than a million more homes – as well as to all the existing homes – in Eastern and South-Eastern regions that have the lowest recorded rainfalls throughout England? Even if all new builds were to be EcoHomes with excellent water saving ratings, the present water shortage situation would not be improved.

Problem of management.

Customers want more water; Water Companies want more reservoirs; Government wants less expense, more control. Water shortage is inevitable, until sufficient investment is forthcoming. Who pays?

The average UK water usage per day is 150 litres per person and rising fast.

If a national water grid were constructed, some experts claim the energy needed to drive it would increase water bills 4-fold. If desalination were to be introduced there would be serious problems in disposing of the high level deposits of brine. Treating and reusing sewage water for drinking carries health problems. Imposing water efficiency measures above the economic level of leakage, ie when it is more expensive to do something than continue to do little, would mean that provisions such as household water meters would simply stir the law of diminishing returns. The solution at present is to allow commercial imperatives to drive the process, rather than impose solutions for the shortfall – inevitably water bills will rise to maintain return on investment and so more new houses will be built in the free market as 'enabling developments'. Again, who really pays?

The Government Environment Minister speaking on BBC News South-East 17th October, offered an interesting solution to the problem of drought: "It would be immoral to pipe water to the South-East. Instead, get the people to go where the water is. It would be much better to have a plan to move the population, centres of government and reconfigure the country in a fairer way ... where the resources are, rather than building a water grid." This 'loopy idea', claim other MP's, conflicts with another Government policy to build lots more homes in the South-East, a designated area of growth and expansion. A better idea would be to invest in developing the economy of other areas, rather than adding yet more high priced houses to the already inflamed outer London country suburbs.

Subsume the UK in the EU

Another dry and thirsty part of the country is Eastern England, the province of East of England Regional Assembly, EERA. Their development programme now

underway was attacked by *Frederick Forsyth* (author of *The Day of the Jackal*) who turned down an invitation to become Ambassador to the East of England Development Agency (EEDA provide the funds for EERA). They wanted him to promote the Region on the world stage. At the time, he wrote back to EEDA's leader:

“For some ten years, since I became fascinated by the sheer duplicity and mendacity of the Europe Project, I have studied it with some intensity and no little research. ... You are being less than frank with the public ... (about) ... the end-of-nation, with its concomitant partner end-of-democracy.

“If you can break provincial England into eight parts, an unavoidable development must then be the abolition of District, Shire, and Borough as units of real local government.

“Regionalism, behind its mask of local democracy, enhanced prosperity for all, but in truth standing for millions more unaccountable gravy-slurping jobsworths, has got to fool enough of the people enough of the time; i.e. until the EU Referendum, which will be as rigged as Prescott and Blair can fix it.

“Before the fight is over, you and yours will have learned the hard way that this old country of ours is not yet prepared to be led into the knacker's yard.” (The full EEDA invitation and Forsyth reply can be found via Google at RegionalAssemblies.co.uk).

Pool water power politics.

Water Companies have their own agendas. Thames Water (as reported in *The Independent*) might be ‘Undisputed holder of the title of Britain’s most hated utility’, but that hasn’t stopped private equity queuing up to buy the company. RWE, the present owner, think Thames is a ‘lucrative target’ and ‘a clean 100% disposal’ would be the ideal financial sale. Despite missed leakage targets and ongoing hosepipe bans, first-round bids

for the utility (August 2006) are in the region of ‘an eye-popping £7bn’.

In October, the Blue Gold rush was truly realised when the Macquarie Aussie bank consortium beat off competition from Qatar to buy Thames Water for £8bn. The German seller RWE, let it be known that present leakage problems were not the result of management challenges, but due to bomb damage from World War II.

United Utilities supply Central England with water and are the worst leakers in Britain. But, they are still ‘an excellent bet for those in search of a steady, reliable, fat dividend – comfortably above 6.5% and the highest in the FTSE 100 (the Good Buy share advice in August by *The Mail on Sunday*). Watch their space.

On reflection, will the pool industry stand up to fight for water sufficiency, or accept that more water controls, usage limits and legal restrictions will be necessary in the near future?

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