

SUBJECT

cc Marks

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cc Ho	A.J. Harrop	BM
MOD	P.L. Gregson	
DIM	B. Ingham	
SO	A.D.S. Goodall	
CSD		
DOE (Giles Shaw)		
WO (Wyn Roberts)		
NIO	J. Vencker	
CO		

10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

16 February 1983

Dear David,

THE WATER WORKERS' DISPUTE

The Prime Minister held a further meeting at 8.30 am this morning to discuss the water workers' strike. Those present were the Home Secretary, the Secretaries of State for Defence, Employment, Scotland and the Environment, the Chief Secretary, Mr. Giles Shaw, Mr. Wyn Roberts (Welsh Office), Messrs. Harrop, Gregson and Goodall and Bernard Ingham.

Your Secretary of State said that there had been little change during the previous 24 hours. There were now 61,000 properties, of which 9,500 were in Wales, without piped water and some 7.6 million people, of whom 1.7 million were in Wales, had been advised to boil water as a precaution. Some bursts had been repaired and some properties reconnected. An improvement was expected today in the water supply in Blaenau/Gwent and writs had been applied for to end the two remaining sit-ins in Wales. The terms of reference for the committee of inquiry had now been agreed as had the side members, and it was expected agreement would be reached today on a chairman. He would continue to urge water authorities to restore supplies to properties cut off, using private contractors if necessary. The union leaders would be open to strong criticism if they did not agree to call off the strike in view of the continuing hardship being caused to the public, the continuing loss of earnings by their members and the futility of prolonging a strike when both sides had agreed that the findings of the committee of inquiry would settle the dispute.

During discussion it was noted that the employers' case would be put to the committee of inquiry by Mr. Dickens, with whom the Departments of the Environment and Employment would keep in close touch at official level; Ministers should avoid getting too closely involved at this stage. If the inquiry did not produce a unanimous report it would even so be difficult for either side not to abide by the findings of the majority, notwithstanding doubts which had been raised about whether the findings would be "binding". He had himself received assurances that they would be so regarded. Water authorities should not hesitate to hire private contractors if necessary and the names of any major contractors who declined to

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undertake this work should be given to the Secretary of State for Employment. Both the amount of money that strikers had lost and the length of time it would take for them to recoup the loss should be publicised.

Summing up the discussion the Prime Minister said that publicity should be given to the fact that the committee of inquiry procedure which had just been agreed had been available since November and that, if the unions had agreed to it then, a damaging and unnecessary strike would have been avoided. It was essential that the employers' case was presented effectively to the committee of inquiry and the Secretaries of State for the Environment and Employment should ensure that all necessary assistance (and, discreetly, publicity) was made available. Until the inquiry's findings were announced the Government's line should be to urge water authorities to restore supplies to as many properties as possible - using contractors where necessary and to urge strikers to return to work, on the grounds that a continuation of the strike was unjustified in view of the union leaders' agreement that the inquiry's findings would settle the dispute. The Civil Contingencies Unit should continue to monitor developments. There would be no meetings of this group on Thursday 17th or Friday 18th February.

I am copying this letter to the Private Secretaries of those Ministers present at the meeting, to John Lyon (Northern Ireland Office), to Messrs. Harrop, Gregson, Goodall and Ingham and to Richard Hatfield (Cabinet Office). I should be grateful if they would arrange that it is given only the minimum necessary circulation.

*Yours sincerely,*

*Michael Scholar*

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David Edmonds, Esq.,  
Department of the Environment

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