News & Updates

Any day-to-day jaws for concern on Dirty Water

- Does a Citizen's Assembly on Water Make Sense?
- Call for a Citizens' Assembly Reaches National Television
- Suddenly, some activity - Dirty Water’s view

Does a Citizen's Assembly on Water Make Sense?

We recently received the following question (shortened for brevity):

The XR advocacy of Citizens' Assemblies baffles me. There was one on Climate Change in 2019 and others on Adult Social Care, Future of Scotland, National Assembly for Wales, Congestion & Air Quality, and Town Centres. They produced some interesting ideas but had fairly low impact as they are not near the centres of power and money. Ireland had an interesting CA on Abortion and voted to repeal the Eighth Amendment. The Dail took this up in the 36th amendment bill of 2018. This CA was fairly influential, on a topic which is ethically divisive.

Dirty Water is very topical but money is the big issue. We need more plant and rainwater cisterns, The water companies want big price increases, OFWAT is allowing smaller ones, but it's still "price increase". Nationalisation has been suggested by the Greens, but full compensation for shareholders would add to the national debt – a mere £2.7 trillion. The creation of a Climate Civil Defence Force with water engineering as its main skill is another possibility. [...]

Here are our thoughts on this:

The advocacy of a Citizens' Assembly has always been one of the three demands of XR. It is recognised that achieving this with everything lined up is a difficult set of conditions to bring about, in terms of achieving:

- mass public support,
- mainstream media attention,
- government sponsorship (but not interference),
- government commitment to respond/act on the citizens' conclusions.

The UK Assemblies have never had all of these aspects addressed in advance. Their running into the sand was inevitable.

Several people in government (this and the previous one), as well as senior civil servants, understand how Citizens' Assemblies work and are exploring democratised decision making in some departments. However, there isn't a widespread public appreciation of their power sharing capacity. Hence, XR has expanded its advocacy of deliberative democratic processes to include Community and Peoples' Assemblies.

Dirty Water is proposing that we don't wait for government action, but take the other elements of a successful Assembly head on. We want to create a **campaigning alliance** to collectively deliver:

- **mass public attention**,
- **sustained media interest**,
- **funding** and
- **popular leverage on a powerful governing party**.

This government still needs wider public endorsement. It can win a significant part of that by committing to act on the public's request on the issue that attracts almost unanimous concern, i.e. healthy, clean waters. If a Citizens' Assembly on Water works, the **precedent will have been set** for the Citizens' Assembly on Climate and Ecological Justice - to say nothing of potentially wider and complementary democratic campaigns.

Can We Afford To Continue To Ignore the Power of Upgrading Decision Making Systems?

Money is allegedly the stalling issue, or at least a procrastinating government can say so. (A Welsh minister has cited this as the obstacle to a Citizen's Assembly on Climate and Ecological Justice in Wales). However, we know that really is a question of **political choices**. There is money if there is an appetite for **taxing land**, **other assets**, even **share transactions**, in proportion to the existing taxes on income.

If **water conservation, supply and treatment** are not fixed, our national infrastructure fails, people get sick and we lose even more of our biodiversity. **Without healthy water systems, economic growth or any other aspirations of government will not be possible**.

It is important that the participants in the Citizens' Assembly on Water are not constrained in their thinking by having to anticipate limits on spending and thus constrain options from the outset.

It's not a question of saying we can't afford to fix our water provision. **We can't afford not to any longer**.

Dirty Water Campaign for Saving Our Waters

The actions proposed by the Dirty Water team are steps towards engagement with the public in local communities, beginning early in 2025. These actions and events can escalate from simpler initial claims on people's attention, through to bringing them into participation in co-created ceremony around local water bodies and ultimately invite passionate protectors to press on, to gather in a local or regional Community Assembly on Water.

Those who participate will be left in no doubt that our ultimate demand is the Citizens' Assembly on Water. Participants will be asked to develop recommendations and demands from that process to take to water companies, authorities and other relevant actors. So our approach is no random scattergun, hoping on happenstance. Building on Wave 6, we aspire to a **coherent progression** towards a complete statement, with **maximum public support**, of what we want from water provision, our legislators and community partners.

Oh... A last reflection in the scying pool... The Citizens' Asssembly on Water needs to make their recommendations **officially**.

There really should be no compensation for the bosses of water companies or their shareholders, should there be a transition away from privatised companies operating for profit. Water company boards and their lick-spittles have squeezed every drop from us, the bill-payers, for 35 years. Thieves deserve nothing. If anything, fat cats of the industry should be prosecuted for their failure to meet their contractual obligations (defined or implicit) and be made to **return undeserved dividends, bonuses, and inflated loan repayments**.

Do you have a question or want to talk about any of these ideas? Drop Us a Line

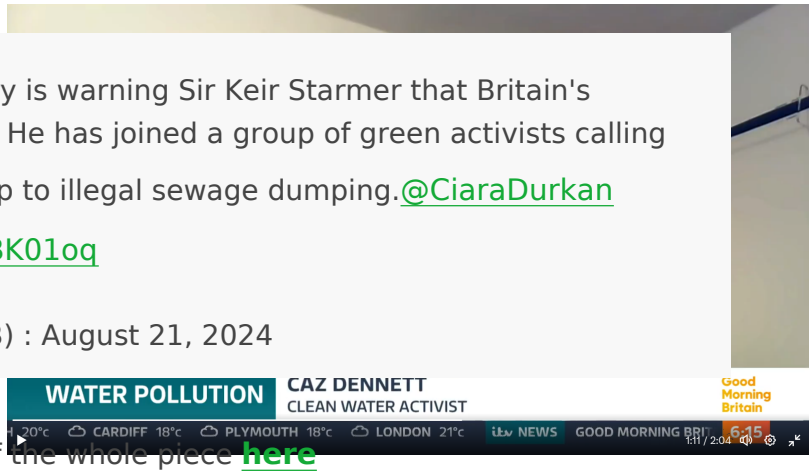
Call for a Citizens' Assembly Reaches National Television

Caz Dennett on ITV's GMB 21-Aug-2024

In a brief slot, Caz cut through perfectly with the demand for a Citizens' Assembly on Water.

In the midst of the GMB report, her words were electrifying. Or was it just us? Have a look and let us know.

> Actor and comedian Stephen Fry is warning Sir Keir Starmer that Britain's waterways are on 'life support'. He has joined a group of green activists calling on the government to put a stop to illegal sewage dumping.@CiaraDurkan reports. pic.twitter.com/yX8QBK01oq
>
> — Good Morning Britain (@GMB) : August 21, 2024



You can see the GMB X (twitter) posting of the whole piece **here**

Do you have a question or want to get in touch? Drop Us a Line

Suddenly, some activity - Dirty Water’s view

A response to Water politics manoeuvres Oct - Nov 2024

Clive Lewis Private Member’s Bill

Launched 15th October, 2024.

Clive Lewis MP has posted his **Private Member’s Water Bill**. It’s on Parliament's website here. You’ll see it’s scheduled for its **second reading on 28th March, 2025**.

Clive Lewis, MP, has given more detail about what he is proposing on his website.

UK & Welsh governments’ Commission: Water sector and its regulation

On 23rd October, 2024, the UK Government (Steve Reed, Environment Secretary) announced its **Independent Commission into the water sector and its regulation**. It published the Commission’s terms of reference the same day. The Commission is required to report in Q2 2025 - ie. only 3 months after the second hearing of Clive Lewis's Water Bill.

A Cynical View?

In the East Anglian Bylines (a Byline Times affiliate) online news, one contributor saw some shady motives in the government's call for the Commission so soon after Lewis’s Bill was announced.

What Dirty Water Says

The Lewis Bill

Although the call for a Citizens’ Assembly (CA) was well-received in XR and by other advocates of democracy when the Bill was announced, you can see that Lewis limits its scope to “water

ownership”, whereas Dirty Water’s scope and proposal for a Citizens’ Assembly on Water is comprehensive.

It is our view that ownership can only be addressed satisfactorily in the context of an all-issues perspective on water in Britain and Northern Ireland.

A lot of what Lewis has described about his Bill is very welcome. His emphasis on “climate mitigation and adaptation”, in particular. A clear strategy and its implementation, too. His call for an advisory Commission sets out the requirement for the Citizens' Assembly, but as noted, its scope is too narrow.

On his clivelewis.org constituency site, the MP expands upon the parliamentary Bill’s header. He talks about the impact of climate crisis, resilience, sewage pollution and industry mismanagement. He is enthusiastic about having a democratic and open process to resolve the issues affecting water supply and waste treatment. He makes some good points about changing our economic perspective: if Mrs Thatcher could do it 45 years ago, it can be done again, and differently. He also takes issue with the way fiscal rules and fixation on maximising profit are at odds with what’s really needed. And he has called for the Citizens’ Assembly.

Dirty Water’s response to Lewis

Lewis is well on the way to describing something that we could support. Just not blindly. If he were to advocate for the Citizens’ Assembly to look at everything, then have a Commission to look at implementation of the citizens’ recommendations? Now that would be a democratic refresh.

The Environment Secretary’s Commission

If Lewis was, relatively innocently perhaps, limiting the scope of a proposed Citizens’ Assembly, the government was intent on having no such thing!

If they were indeed bent on cutting out Lewis, they jumped all over the idea of the advisory Commission and elbowed the Citizens’ Assembly notion overboard.

And they’ve been really keen to nail down the Commission’s room for manoeuvre too. There is no idea of any change in the nature of the management of water companies – the “private regulated model” continues. The conception that there is any source of funding other than private investment is also firmly shut out. Economics is placed at least equivalent to the environmental interest.

It really shouldn’t be necessary to have to point out the flaws in such a narrow world view but, yet again, we must:

- No renationalisation on grounds of cost, so private ownership will continue.
  - The existing companies have broken any covenant with us. They’re not entitled to compensation – we should be getting money back.
  - There are other alternative models to renationalisation: municipalisation, not-for-profits, cooperatives, direct consumer control, etc.

- Investment from markets only
  - Hasn’t overseas investment brought us to the present disaster?
  - There is no consideration of government bonds.
  - There is no consideration of widening the tax take by taxing land and other assets fairly, at the same levels as income tax.
- Where is the investment to be spent? On big engineering, reservoir construction in Wales for English consumption, is the inference:
  - what about rehydrating soils (while cleaning up farming)?
  - what about weaning farming off its chemicals - insecticides, herbicides, fertiliser, antibiotics?
  - what about restricting construction on floodplains?
  - what about allowing rivers to meander again?
  - what about extending woodland and recovering marshland?
  - what about ending shooting estates’ destruction of peat bog?
  - what about restoring hedgerow and ditches on farmland?
  - what about planning constraints on paving over suburban gardens?
  - what about blue-greening across urban landscapes?
  - what about beavers?
  - what about metering licenced abstractions?
  - All the above would help replenish aquifers, out of the reach of evaporation in a heatwave .
  - A Citizens’ Assembly would likely pose these questions and more.
- Our rivers and seas are polluted, but 40% of this is from agriculture:
  - water companies and regulators have no control over agriculture
  - or landfill (much of its contents undocumented)
  - or industrial users
  - or over licenced and unlicenced abstraction

The government talk is of a “vision”, of ticking every box. But they’re boxing us into the same failed model. Only with the hope of better regulation.

Have they seen where the Environment Agency’s own pension funds have invested heavily? Or perhaps they have.

Participation with the Commission?

There is little to encourage Dirty Water to make representations to this Commission. The minister lost us when ignoring the possibility of a Citizens’ Assembly, locking in his own control of the subject and all likely outcomes. And locking out democratic participation. This was then compounded by imposing his own rigid parameters on the whole exercise.

There is no vision here, no democracy, no true recognition of the scale of the problems. That is why, with our allies, we still need to convene our own independent Citizens’ Assembly and oblige the government to take seriously the actual levels of public concern.

Do you have a question or want to get in touch? Drop The Dirty Water Campaign crew a Line