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

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