



Liquid Politics: the historic formation of the water consumer

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***Liquid Politics* has examined conflicts over water in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain. This period forms a prehistory to current concerns about water shortages and sustainable consumption. It brought constant supply, baths and WCs to cities. But the late Victorian period was also a time of droughts and disruption, with heated conflicts over how water was priced, who should own and manage it, and, indeed, what was legitimate and what wasteful supply. Our research revealed the rise of early consumer defence leagues and traced an expanding sense of citizenship and entitlement to water that has impeded attempts at demand management to this day.**

KEY FINDINGS

- It is unhelpful to view consumer and citizen as natural opposites, as if one is private and the other public-oriented. Historically, debates about the rights and duties of citizenship helped create a stronger consumer identity. Conflicts over cheap and constant flowing water in the private home were connected to a public politics of taxation, provision and welfare. The spread of the private bath and water closet led to new forms of public engagement as well as to new private habits and sensibilities.
- Droughts have been a constant feature of modern life, irrespective of different systems of ownership.
- Our research identifies a 'civilising contract' at the heart of the problem of water supply and drought. Ever-increasing water use became a positive feature of civilised life. In exchange, citizens were expected to act as civic-minded consumers in times of scarcity.
- Consumers' routines and perceptions of entitlements have contributed to the operation and vulnerability of systems of provision.
- Understanding the historical evolution of droughts, consumer values and routines illuminates both the long-term dynamics of demand and the barriers for a more sustainable water regime today.

HIGHLIGHTS

Liquid Politics has used droughts and conflicts over water in Britain to explore the changing sensibilities, habits and demands of consumers. Our starting point was the activism of water consumers in the Victorian era of private (monopoly) water supply. Initially, water consumer activism was a politics of taxation. Householders paid for water through a tax based on the value of their property, as the majority of Britons do to this day. The first

consumer bodies, formed in 1870s Sheffield and in London in the 1880s, challenged water companies and their charges in the courts. Water Consumer Defence Leagues were formed across London, and succeeded in reducing rates for thousands of metropolitan consumers. In Sheffield in the early 1880s, the Bath Defence Association opposed 'non-domestic' charges on fixed baths. Baths, they insisted, were entirely domestic, not luxuries subject to extra charges. This campaign went to the core of a new civilising sensibility. Increased water use was equated with progress. The bath campaign highlighted the gap between consumers' expanding sense of entitlement, based on the spread of new technologies, and water providers' restrictive, supply-side approach to water use.

'[T]he average consumer wastes water with unthinking abandon; it has become usual to regard heavy water consumption as a virtuous sign of civilization and super-hygiene'

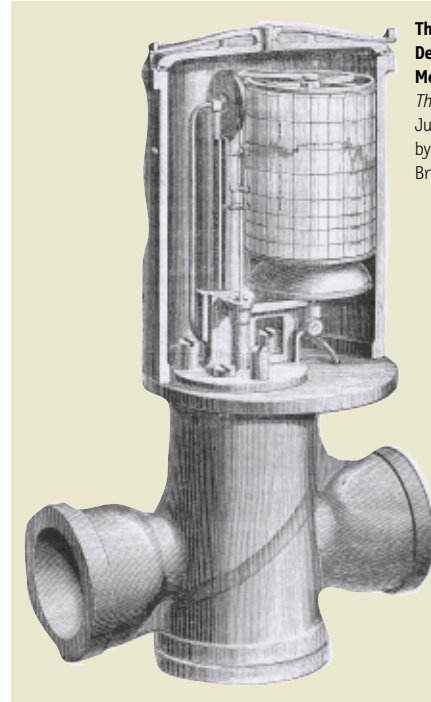
The Times, 6 December 1952.

A series of droughts and water shortages in East London in the 1890s brought a new phase. A consumer politics of taxation gave way to an expanded politics of provision. With water supply restricted to a few hours each day, public health concerns and questions of absolute need came to the fore. Broad coalitions emerged. The East London Water Consumer Defence Association joined forces with Progressive Liberals and others supporting the municipal takeover of the water companies. The identity of water consumers now expanded from a focus on propertied male taxpayers to the needs and rights of all water users. Images of the poor – men, women and

Findings:

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Public ownership did not end disputes over waste or scarcity. The equation of increased water use with progress became a problem.



The waste meter:
Deacon's Waste Water
Meter, Liverpool 1870s
The Sanitary World, 12
July 1884. Reproduced
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children – waiting at standpipes illustrates this shift.

The issue of water 'waste' featured prominently during these 1890s droughts. Indignant consumers blamed shortages on the burst pipes and profiteering of the East London company. The water company, by contrast, pointed to low rainfall and wasteful consumers. The municipal argument put forward by consumer advocates gained official sanction in the run-up to the public takeover of London's water supply in 1902: a publicly owned resource – available on the basis of universal, constant provision and managed for the good of the community – would be consumed responsibly by consumer-citizens. This was the essence of the civilising contract. Supporters of municipalisation, however, were naïve to presume that placing water in public hands would eliminate scarcity.

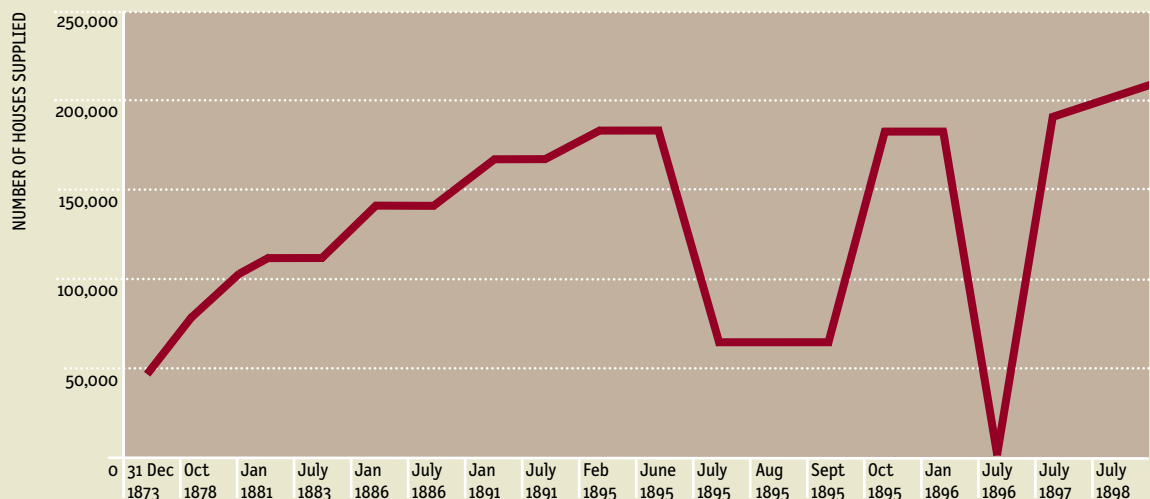
Droughts and other forms of disruption continued after municipalisation. Severe droughts in the inter-war years – in 1921, 1929 and 1933-34 – revealed a fundamental split between urban and 'backward' rural provision. Water

'When iron pipes and high-pressure engines were introduced a much larger quantity of water was used. The requirements of householders are naturally and properly always on the rise: the standard of comfort constantly improves'

Archibald Dobbs, *By Meter or Annual Value?* (London: 1890)

providers now had to cater for the continuing spread of the water closet, the bath and the garden, but also for the motor car, the swimming pool, tennis courts and golf courses. Tensions within the civilising contract of water use were becoming evident. During the 1934 drought, critics of piecemeal government policies noted the ironies of appeals for 'civic' economies in domestic consumption after people had been encouraged for years to consume

Diagram showing 'peaks' and 'troughs' in the constant supply of water from the East London Waterworks Company, December 1873 to July 1898

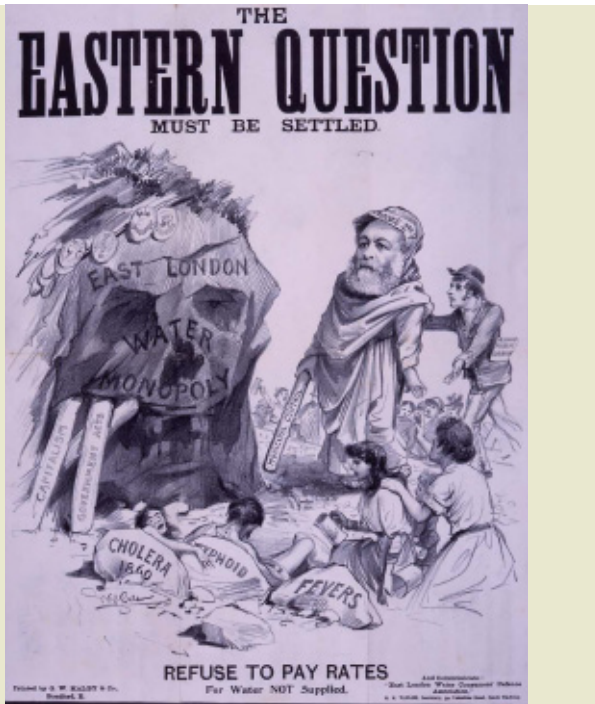


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Moses: East London Water Consumers' Defence Association poster, 1898

The National Archives:
PRO, COPY 1, 143
folio 165.



A better understanding of the historical evolution of droughts can illuminate the long-term dynamics of demand and the barriers to a more sustainable water regime today.

more water in the pursuit of a middle-class ideal of cleanliness.

After the Second World War, the problem of urban water again came to the fore. A series of droughts in the 1950s brought severe disruptions to water supply for industrial and domestic users, especially hitting the industrial north. Concern began to focus on the long-term costs of the civilising contract, harnessed to aspirations for a continually rising standard of living, with consumers unwilling to accept limits to their entitlement to water. Alongside increased industrial and agricultural water use, there now appeared to be a potentially open-ended increase within the home, with the spread of washing machines and other appliances. This period saw the return of the nineteenth-century debate over the domestic water meter, as a possible way of curbing consumer behaviour by turning water into a priced commodity.

Drought and other forms of supply disruption are not merely the result of technical failings, but are an endemic feature of the relationship between water providers and consumers. Water consumers have always played an active role in shaping how systems of supply operate and break down. Consumer behaviour at times of drought has varied and been unpredictable. In London, for example, many consumers responded positively to appeals for economy in 1921, while some poor consumers stockpiled water, as a precaution against shortage. In 1929 appeals for restraint even led to increased consumption all round.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Our historical research on droughts, consumption routines and political conflicts over water has important lessons for the current debate about sustainability. Who owns and manages water is less relevant than people's

changing daily routines and perceptions of entitlement.

In the past, droughts have been treated as temporary disruptions, requiring only temporary adjustments from consumers. With 'water stress' set to become a permanent feature of British life, there is a new policy concern with 'behaviour change'. Such concern is not new, however; it has a history. Providers have long recognised that consumer behaviour is a crucial element in the two-way flow between supply and demand. Drought and other forms of disruption have been integral to the evolving system of water provision. Consumers have played an active role in how these systems operate and break down. What was rational for consumers was often at odds with what was rational for providers. East End consumers in the 1890s droughts, for example, left backyard taps running all night to catch the intermittent supply. The water company prosecuted for 'waste' in such cases.

Water providers today are increasingly recognising consumers as 'co-partners' in the management of demand. They are, however, up against a historical dilemma. Campaigns to conserve water and reduce waste in short-term crises have not been matched by people's willingness to reduce consumption in the long term. For more than a century, increased water consumption for all has been embraced as a sign of progress by regulators and consumer advocates alike. This has left a cultural legacy of values and a sense of entitlement that does not yield easily to demand management.

To most people, water is not a typical economic good. Charges in Britain have historically been linked to property rates rather than to the volume consumed. Water is woven inconspicuously into routine practices, from showering to cooking and gardening. Authorities have been reluctant to interfere in the private world of

individual consumers, but droughts reveal the limits of appeals to voluntary austerity. In the light of long-term concerns, water providers and regulators have begun to reassess the ambivalent status of domestic water as an economic good, through the piecemeal introduction of the domestic water meter. They will also need to address the civilising contract that stands at the heart of the relationship between the state and the water consumer.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Liquid Politics has explored conflicts over water, droughts and changing water practices in modern Britain, with particular emphasis on London, Sheffield, and some rural communities. The project is part of the Cultures of Consumption Research Programme (grant number RES-154-25-0022), funded jointly by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Arts and Humanities Research Council. It runs from October 2005 to July 2007. The project team is Frank Trentmann and Vanessa Taylor (School of History, Classics & Archaeology, Birkbeck College, University of London).

PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE

Trentmann F. and Taylor V. 'From Users to Consumers: Water Politics in Nineteenth-Century London', in

Trentmann F.(ed.), *The Making of the Consumer: Knowledge, Power and Identity in the Modern World* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006), pp.53-79.

Taylor V. and Trentmann F. 'Political Matter: Water, Practices and Conflict in Late Victorian Britain', Cultures of Consumption Working Paper No.34 at: <http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk/publications.html>.

Chappells H., Medd W., Taylor V. and Trentmann, F. 'Drought is Normal: The Socio-Technical Evolution of Drought and Water Demand in the UK, 1893-2006' (forthcoming).

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CULTURES OF CONSUMPTION RESEARCH PROGRAMME

The Cultures of Consumption Programme funds research on the changing nature of consumption in a global context. The Programme investigates the different forms, development and consequences of consumption, past and present. Research projects cover a wide range of subjects, from UK public services to drugs in east Africa, London's fashionable West End to global consumer politics. The £5 million Cultures of Consumption Programme is the first to bring together experts from the social sciences and the arts and humanities. It is co-funded by the ESRC and the AHRC.

The aims of the Cultures of Consumption Programme are:

- to understand the practice, ethics and knowledge of consumption
- to assess the changing relationship between consumption and citizenship
- to explain the shifting local, metropolitan and transnational boundaries of cultures of consumption
- to explore consumption in the domestic sphere
- to investigate alternative and sustainable consumption
- to develop an interface between cutting edge academic research and public debate.

For further details take a look at our website www.consume.bbk.ac.uk

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