

Blog The Watchful (Grumpy) Citizen - Sewage pollution scandal: Citizens shouldn't be made to feel guilty

Here is my latest post on the infamous water sewage pollution scandal. A piece in *The Conversation* got on my nerves a bit... Or at least got me thinking. Can individuals be held responsible for environmental crises?

In an opinion piece she contributed to the website last August, Randa L. Kachef, a lecturer in geography at King's College reacts to the series of regulatory fines faced by several water companies that Ofwat, UK's Water Services Regulation Authority, announced recently. The sanction had long been expected and called for by frustrated customers and activists, swimmers and surfers' groups in particular.

Yet Kachef puts a real damper on any potential celebratory reaction, if you'll excuse my watery metaphor. She states that such measures are no more than symbolic ones meant to pacify people's annoyance / resentment / rage. Not only do they just come down to a tiny financial glitch for the companies but they're bound to increase customers' bills – a scenario being played out over and over again.

So if not fines, what else? And who should be held responsible?

I'm all in when Kachef suggests a stint in prison may get some sense of responsibility into those companies' top-executives. As she says herself, they repeatedly committed a criminal offence as defined by the Environmental Protection Act.

Responsibility does not only lie with them though. And on this point, I simply resent Ms Kachef for concluding that unless the public take *their* responsibility and start paying attention to what they flush and wash down things are not really going to improve. (272)

The public really?

Not the conservative governments for never implementing the Flood and Water Management Act since 2010? Not the construction developers for failing to green urban areas as required? Nor Ofwat, the regulator, for ... well for not regulating as explained by Sandra Laville in *The Guardian* for example.

The regular visitors on my blog know what my motto is: public goods (water, forests, coastlines and so on) and public services should be managed or at least strictly regulated by public institutions! I believe that Water utilities should never have been privatised, at least privatised completely. The *state* and governments need to take their responsibility. Keir Starmer toyed with the idea renationalising but seems to have walked back. It would be too costly for the taxpayers. But surely the Labour government can impose heavier sanctions and threaten to let the companies go bust without bail-out, without taxpayers' contribution!

More generally, whether it be water management, pollution levels, climate change or else rampant misinformation, I'm sick and tired of individual citizens being made to feel guilty when they are just puny soldiers in a globalized war. Sure, every single one of us is part of the problem and absolutely must try to contribute – consume less, recycle, ride rather than drive, aim for the right sources of news – that is those of us who *can*!

But honestly what are we faced with cover-ups and green washing, cronyism at the state level and with super powerful oil lobbies working hard to derail efforts to contain for climate action, cleaning or energy transition. (*See how the anti-moderation, so-called free speech absolutist tech bros have joined forces with Donald Trump; they oppose ANY form of moderation. Well, I approve whole-heartedly of the EU's efforts to do just so, moderate the content of their platforms to protect citizens!*)

Talking about polluted environment and water reminds me of the fight of the mothers of Corby in the toxic waste scandal depicted in the new series Toxic Town or of the one against a chemical giant in Hinckley, California as depicted in the Oscar-winning movie "Erin Brockovich". These mothers, these citizens were left to fend for themselves for far too long.

Don't blame *me*, a mere citizen, for the water scandal unfolding right now. Protect me, a mere citizen, against it. (611 – 654 words)

Texte de depart

Three water companies face big fines for sewage spills – it won't do any good unless our whole approach to waste changes

Randa Lindsey Kachef, Lecturer in Geography, King's College London , The Conversation, adapted, August 13, 2024

The recent announcement of £168 million in sewage pollution fines issued to three water companies has renewed hope that the regulator for England and Wales, Ofwat, is finally taking action in line with public opinion.

In reality, though, this looks more like a tokenistic gesture in a frustrating sisyphian scenario – one we have experienced before in the form of past multi-million pound fines, and one I suspect we will continue to relive, and regret, over and over unless new approaches and collaborative efforts are made.

The reality of corporate fines is they rarely directly affect the offending companies. Rather, they are absorbed in corporate processes as line items on yearly financial reports. When these reports are unbalanced, adjustments are made in the form of increases in the cost of services – in this scenario, our water bills (increases that Ofwat recently approved).

Meanwhile, the fines some of us are rejoicing about are mere drops in the bucket for companies like Thames Water, whose £104 million penalty represents around 5% of the £2.2 billion revenue it reported last year.

These fines are simply pacifiers in response to public outcry, where the movement to address sewage contamination has been popularised by celebrities such as Feargal Sharkey and activists like Surfers Against Sewage.

In many ways, Thames Water is biding its time until the fruits of public investment in the London Tideway Tunnel become a reality. The Tideway Tunnel is Thames Water's response to the 2012 European Union ruling that the UK was in breach of directives to protect the environment from sewage pollution. And yes, Thames Water's consumers paid for these £5 billion infrastructure improvements.

Originally designed by Sir Joseph William Bazalgette, the capital's sewerage system dates back to 1866, meaning not only is the crumbling infrastructure in dire need of renovations, it was never intended to service the huge population that lives in London today.

With its increased capacity and streamlined structure, the Tideway Tunnel has been framed as a universal solution for London, promising a 95% reduction in sewage pollution events. Yet it is essentially a bigger and more expensive version of an antiquated system that is fundamentally flawed, unless everyone involved follows the same rules to ensure its longevity. [...]

Of course, there are good reasons for the reputation of greed and mismanagement that private water companies have earned; they are capitalist entities who seek to increase their yearly revenues.

So, what needs to be done to move forward from this desperate situation? Ofwat's implementation of an independent monitor to oversee Thames Water's financial turnaround plan is a step in the right direction. However, to otherwise continue on the same route of tokenistic fines that are easily brushed off through accounting systems and cost diversion to the customer, seems to fall into the category of doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.

This raises the question of how to ensure accountability among offenders. It turns out that according to the sentencing guidelines for environmental offences defined in 2014, deliberate and repeated breaches of the 1990 Environmental Protection Act are a criminal offence, punishable by the suspension of the business and even imprisonment. Perhaps a few weeks behind bars for some water company bosses would finally get the message across.

But alongside this radical suggestion, it is also time for the public to take responsibility for its part in the maintenance and preservation of our sewage systems. It is easy to point the finger at "big water" and demand that sewage overflows stop, but the misuse of these systems is equally as responsible for the associated blockages and failures.

As individuals, we have become further and further removed from the processes that keep our immediate surroundings clean. Somehow, we are under the impression that what we flush and pour down the drains magically goes away. It's time to take better care of the systems we all pay to build and maintain; to reconnect with our waste, and take ownership for our part in breaking the system. (670 words)