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Why water shouldn't be privatised

The proposal to privatise our water authorities overlooks the fact that these include what is essentially a *public* element. The Thames Water Authority, for example, is by law entrusted with the management of the nation's greatest river highway. This public element is fully recognised by the governing statute, the Water Act of 1973. The act requires water authorities, in their management and trusteeship of what are undoubtedly national assets, to preserve the beauty of rural and urban areas, conserve flora, fauna and geological or physiographical features of special interest, and protect buildings and other objects of architectural, archaeological or historic interest.

The authorities must preserve public access to mountains, moors, heaths, downland, cliffs and shores. They must protect public rights of navigation and put their property rights to the best use for allowing public recreation. For these purposes the water authorities have extensive powers to make byelaws enforceable by the criminal courts. These and other powers have been used over a long period by the water authorities and their statutory predecessors in the service of the public. Their officers and employees are imbued with this tradition of public service, which in most instances has been faithfully upheld.

River regulation is akin to local government. No one would contemplate privatising local authorities, because their duties are by their very nature essentially public. In many if not all their functions, water authorities are but another form of local authority, and should surely be treated accordingly.¹

¹ *The Times*, 6 May 1986.