



Who's Behind the Bottled Water Backlash in Britain? Don't be Fooled by Strange Bedfellows

July 18, 2008 - The United Kingdom has been a central battleground in the bottled water backlash over the past twelve months. We regularly hear news stories in the British press of new anti-bottled water campaigns popping up with catch phrases like Turn on To Tap Water, Tap Into Water and London on Tap.

One would think that there is a strong grassroots movement in England actively confronting the bottled water industry. While this may be true to a certain extent, the reality is that the majority of the anti-bottled water campaigns in place in the UK are initiatives of for profit private water services companies.

An important grassroots effort of note was undertaken by British food and agriculture advocates called "[Sustain](#)" which has published two important reports on bottled water use in the UK. Their 2006 report - Have you bottled it? - which examined a number of issues related to bottled water, was coupled with a short report that disclosed the amount of UK government funds spent on bottled water. Sustain's report generated a large amount of press about the issue and helped put pressure on all levels of government in the country to disclose the amount of public monies used for the purchase of bottled water. The 2006 report was followed up in 2008 with an updated version called [The taps are turning](#).

On the heels of Sustain's 2006 report many companies in the UK private water services industry launched anti-bottled water and pro-tap water campaigns. By embarking on pro-tap water campaigns the private water industry is treading in some contradictory territory. On the one hand these companies, as do publicly owned and run water utilities in North America (95% of the water utilities in Canada are publicly run, 85% in the US), see the bottled water industry as a competitor. In places like Canada public water providers and water utility workers see the bottled water industry working to undermine the public's confidence in tap water. By weaning people off of public tap water in order to consume more and more bottled water, the ground is laid for greater public acceptance of the privatization of water services.

In the UK however, where the public water delivery and treatment system was completely sold off to corporations under Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in 1989, the relationship with the bottled water industry is different (for a detailed briefing on UK water privatization visit [Public Services International Research Unit](#)). Private water delivery companies see bottled water as a direct competitor for their product, tap water. By launching high profile pro-tap water and anti-bottled water campaigns, often in collaboration with popular daily newspapers, these initiatives can be seen as nothing more than a renewed form of market advertising for their products.

It is not surprising, then, that the pro tap water movement in the UK has achieved such prominence. With the PR teams from several private water companies working on the issue, and the use of the print media for promotion, it is bound to achieve some prominence.

In the past 6 months, almost every private water services company in the UK has mounted its own PR campaign promoting tap water. Thames Water (formerly owned by German services giant [RWE](#)), the private company in charge of all of London's water and sewerage services, is involved with two high profile campaigns promoting tap water, 'London on Tap' and 'Water on Tap' with London newspaper The Evening Standard. Both campaigns are designed to promote London's drinking water through restaurants and hotels. These two campaigns alone have generated a huge media response in the UK and have actually been credited with causing a drop in the sale of bottled water.

The UK private water services industry has been using similar tactics to confront the bottled water industry for years. As far back as 2000, Thames Water was claiming in the media to have better tasting water than bottled water. In 2001, another private water company, Yorkshire Water organized a 'Tap-v-Cap' challenge that showed 76% of the people who participated could not tell the difference between bottled and tap water. In 2004 Yorkshire Water actually trademarked 'their' water under the brand Icytonic.

While these campaigns have been successful at raising critical concerns about the consumption of bottled water and helped to foster popular action, there is a fundamental contradiction when these initiatives have their root in private for-profit water services corporations.

In many respects these campaigns are simply market advertising for the product being sold by the private water company, namely, tap water, couched in the discourse of environmental activism. Hitching onto the bottled water backlash is an easy way for these companies to rebrand themselves as providers of safe water and champions of the environment.

In many cases, however, the opposite is true when these companies are consistently fined for environmental and financial abuses. As recently as June, 2008, Severn Trent, which serves 3.7 million customers in the Midlands and mid Wales, was fined the equivalent of \$70 million for delivering poor service to its customers and for deliberately providing false information to UK water and sewerage industry regulators Ofwat. In April of this

year, Thames Water, the UK's largest private water company, was also fined \$18.9 million for similar abuses.

These are only two in a long list of reprimands directed at the UK private water industry since privatization. Take, for instance, the recent boil water advisory for 250,000 Anglian Water customers in central England. With these problems in mind, it is no surprise that these companies will jump at any chance to paint themselves in a greener light.

For anti-bottled water activists in North America, where across the board water privatization has not occurred, British water services corporations and anti-bottled water campaigns seem like strange bedfellows. Given that the climate for privatization is not yet favourable, North American water services corporations focus much of their public relations initiatives lobbying legislators and searching for new markets. For the private water services industry in North America, it is not much of a stretch to believe that they welcome increased consumption of bottled water given its role in setting the stage for the privatization of water services.

Private water services companies in North America know that people who are convinced to buy bottled water as their main source of drinking water are likely to lose confidence in their publicly delivered water. These companies are comfortable with the bottled water industry fomenting and then capitalizing on the public's fears of public water utilities while simultaneously cultivating consumers' willingness to pay large amounts of money for a litre of water. In this way the bottled water industry helps grease the wheels for the acceptance of privatized water services.

The advocates of water service corporations can point to an increased willingness to pay for clean and safe water. This willingness to pay is demonstrated by the high consumption of bottled water. If people are prepared to pay for bottled water because they have been convinced it is safe and healthy, they will also be willing to pay for privatized water services.

Because the privatization of the UK's water utilities took place before bottled water had become ubiquitous, British water service corporations can concern themselves with competing against the bottled water industry for what amounts to the same consumer market for their products. They are also using the opportunity to clean their questionable environmental records.

The next time we hear of a new tap water campaign coming out of the UK, let's cheer for the profile the issue is getting, but we need to be wary that such a campaign is driven by a for profit water services company whose aim is to promote its brand of privatized water.

Recent bottled water related articles

[UK] [Official: London Tap Water Is The Best In Britain](#)

July 17, 2008, The Evening Standard – London’s tap water has been rated the best in Britain by scientists.

[US] [On the Side: Bottled water's new wave](#)

July 17, 2008, The Philadelphia Inquirer - For a moment, just a year, maybe two ago, it seemed that a tipping point had been reached: Bottled water wasn't cool anymore; it was uncool. The plastic bottles had taken on the aspect of handheld SUVs - oil hogs to manufacture, to haul (from Fiji, for Pete's sake!), to get rid of.

[Japan] [Real cost of bottled water](#)

July 13, 2008, The Japan Times - Since the Group of Eight talks produced some agreement on the environment, Japanese can at least take time to reconsider their lifestyles. Recently, one of the hottest environmental issues abroad is bottled water.

[Canada] [New campaign urges people to 'hit the taps'](#)

July 12, 2008, CTVBC - At the Burnaby Costco store, one of the biggest sellers is bottled water.

[US] [Lifecycle Analysis of Tap Water vs Bottled Water](#)

July 11, 2008, Treehugger

[Canada] [Eliminating disposable water bottles](#)

July 10, 2008, Montreal Gazette - More than 300 families in Beaconsfield have taken the pledge to stop using disposable water bottles after the city launched a campaign asking residents to give up buying single-use plastic water bottles for a year.

[US] [Nestlé water plant? Not in our town, Enumclaw says](#)

July 10, 2008, The Seattle Times - Last spring, in the small town of Enumclaw, a company came calling. What it wanted was water. One hundred million gallons a year, to be precise.

[UK] [Bottled water is just a useless fad](#)

July 10, 2008, The Sun - Here's how much fluid your body really needs...

[Fiji] [Water industry ready for new excise duty](#)

July 10, 2008, Fiji Times - The water bottling industry will pay a new excise duty once matters are sorted with the interim Government, says spokesman Jay Dayal.

[US] [Bottled water sales are sinking](#)

July 8, 2008, The Associated Press - With a day's worth of bottled water — the recommended 64 ounces — costing hundreds to thousands of dollars a year depending on the brand, more people are opting to slurp water that comes straight from the sink.

[US] [Putting a cap on the bottled water industry](#)

July 7, 2008, The Boston Globe - Over a half-billion dollars of Massachusetts' taxpayer money will be spent this year on clean drinking water program loans to communities, yet

Beacon Hill has been strangely silent about - and invested not one penny in defense of - small- and often low-income rural towns that stand alone against what many see as a threat to their drinking water supplies: Swiss-based Nestle Waters.

[US] [Coca-Cola agrees to \\$137.5 mln settlement in case](#)

July 7, 2008, Reuters News - Coca-Cola Co agreed to pay \$137.5 million to settle a shareholder lawsuit that claimed the world's largest soft drink maker artificially inflated sales to boost its stock price, according to court documents.

[Canada] [Bottled water tops green blacklist](#)

July 6, 2008, Edmonton Journal - Want an easy way to go green? Can the bottled water.

[Fiji] [Ports loses out in bottled water crisis](#)

July 6, 2008, Fiji Times - The Fiji Ports Authority will lose out on thousands of dollars in income with the decision by water bottling companies to stop production. The industry stand is a result of Cabinet's decision to implement a new tax structure on bottled water.

[Fiji] [Firms stop work over export duty](#)

July 5, 2008, Fiji Times - About 720 workers will be affected after the bottled water industry ceased production because of a new tax structure. The industry yesterday said it had stopped all production.

[US] [USA Springs files Ch. 11](#)

July 2, 2008, TheDeal.com - Nottingham, N.H.-based USA Springs Inc. has just become one more company to slip into Chapter 11 in an attempt to stave off a foreclosure sale.

[Fiji] [Firm queries State decision](#)

July 4, 2008, Fiji Times - Cabinet's decision to impose 20 cents per litre export duty on all mineral water exports and 20 cents per litre excise duty on mineral water sold for domestic consumption is not good news to bottled water companies.

[UK] [CITY WANTS TO WEAN ITSELF FROM BOTTLED WATER, BUT ...](#)

June 28, 2008, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette - Mayor Luke Ravenstahl would love to reduce the city's reliance on bottled water, but as long as the plumbing in the City-County Building remains in its current condition, city employees will quench their thirsts at the water cooler.

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