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From the
Minister of State
for Consumer Affairs

The Rt Hon Sally Oppenheim MP

Mike Pattison Esq
Private Secretary
Prime Minister's Office
10 Downing Street
London SW1

22 July 1981

Dear Mike,

... Mrs Oppenheim has suggested that the Prime Minister should be aware of the enclosed newsheet, about the Government's decision to require the British Gas Corporation to withdraw from the retailing of gas appliances, issued by the gas industry unions.

Yours ever,

Peter McCarthy

PETER McCARTHY
Private Secretary

Gaspoint

Be on your
GUARD

SPECIAL CRISIS ISSUE

THIS SPECIAL issue has been financed by personal donations by members of the General and Municipal Workers Union (manual and clerical sections), the National and Local Government Officers Association, the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions, and the Transport and General Workers Union at the North Thames Gas Central Stores and Transport complex in Bromley-by-Bow. Up to 500 jobs are threatened at our depot alone by government plans to hive off part of the Gas Board to private enterprise.

Gas - another sellout!

What the great gas sale will cost YOU...

If British Gas is forced by government to cease selling gas appliances: Gas showrooms will close, cutting off customers from their main service contact point;

The market will decline forcing manufacturers to close down, with consequent loss of jobs, services and supplies;

Charges to customers would rocket because of the profit motive, and extra charges would be likely if British Gas had to service appliances;

The risk of potentially lethal installations by "cowboy" firms would escalate;

Customers would be put at risk by the collapse of private companies, and British Gas could become a drain on the public purse if it lost its most profitable section;

Safety levels generally would certainly decrease, along with the research and development work which has been pioneered by British Gas;

Expertise apprenticeships and in-service training which has been the hallmark of British Gas would be lost, as would the benefits of a labour intensive industry;

The extensive telephone network operated throughout the industry would disappear with the showrooms, reducing efficiency and our ability to cope with emergencies.

As can be seen, there is a real risk that having off our retail trade might lead to the sort of situation faced by many continental gas consumers. Imagine the delay, the cost and the frustration which this causes. All the more reason for you to express your concern at the government's proposals.

Unions plan fight for jobs

THE GOVERNMENT is all set to break up British Gas.

Consumer Affairs Minister Sally Oppenheim wants to close down or sell off gas showrooms throughout the country, despite protests from Gas Corporation Chairman Sir Dennis Rooke, gas workers unions, and Labour members of parliament.

Workers in the industry fear that up to 30,000 jobs may be lost nationwide, with another 15,000 going in ancillary industries.

Unofficial action by gas workers is certain as the full impact of the Government's plans is realised and meetings are to take place between all the unions involved to plan a united campaign of opposition.

Union members fear that it will be more than their jobs which are at risk. They warn that safety standards and the already over-inflated price levels faced by consumers will be adversely affected by handing over the Gas Corporation's retail trade to private enterprise.

DANGER to the family from lower safety standards and badly-installed gas appliances is feared as de-nationalisation of the industry nears 'D-day'.

Natural gas is a safe fuel for the home, but like any combustible substance it must be used responsibly.

That is why British Gas provides a subsidised safety service for all its customers.

Private dealers are unlikely to offer such a subsidy, and their higher costs and lower standards are bound to result in danger to life and limb.

Accidents do not figure on balance sheets, and with profits as their motive rather than a sense of social responsibility, private suppliers could be bringing death into your home.



This may be the last of your handy gas showroom — if the government has its way.

DEATH IN THE HOME

Watch out — there's a dealer about!

In the four years from 1976-80, of the 200-plus accidents caused by poor combustion or installation problems with gas fires, almost all resulted from private installation.

An even higher percentage of accidents with water heaters was recorded among those installed by private dealers and in the same period there were 227 serious incidents involving gas central heating.

Yet the Monopolies Commission saw no safety problems with gas central heating because most of these installations were not carried out by British Gas, and is recommending that private dealers should be the ones to handle all

to. Safety clearly comes second to those whose sole motive is to make money.

Manufacturers have depended on British Gas to generate and maintain a healthy and viable appliance market, and want this relationship to continue.

It is only the Monopolies Commission and the present government which wants to hand over this expanded market entirely to private traders. And the reason is simple — the Gas Board's retail trade is its most profitable section.

The Gas Board monopoly is easily justified by just on safety and maintenance, but on its efficiency, its financial stability and its encouragement of Authorised Dealers who have increased the range of goods available to consumers.

WE STOPPED an East End housewife as she came out of her local gas showroom to see what she thought about the Monopoly Commission report. She had never heard of it.

As she had just signed up a hire purchase agreement on a new cooker, we asked what she would do in three years time if it broke down and she found that no spare parts could be obtained because the manufacturer had gone out of business.

"I'd be hopping mad," she said. "The saleswoman in the showroom told me they'd provide spare parts and servicing for years."

So we told her: "In three years time there may be no showrooms to go to, and North Thames Gas may not be able to sell or service appliances."

"Are you from 'Canada' or 'That's Life'?" she said, coupled with a rude expletive.

She got quite upset when we explained that this was what the Government was planning.

"We've always had a local gas showroom," she said. "Me and my husband chose our first cooker here, before we got married. I even know some of the gasmen by name."

"It's stupid, if you ask me. They might be a bit pricey at times, but at least you get a good service."

Our friend was beginning to get rather confused. She said the same model cooker she was buying was cheaper at a nearby discount warehouse, but she'd gone to the gas showroom because she knew they could guarantee service. "You only have a pick up the phone," she said.

We went on to tell her that the Gas Board is the biggest customer of appliance manufacturer-

"Hopping mad" at Thatcher's plans

ers. The government want to encourage competition by closing down the showrooms.

Then we asked what she used the showroom for. "I pay my gas bill there, and my HP payments. My friend and I have a look round at things or go to the cookery demonstrations when we're out shopping."

"And I do a few bits and pieces for my mum. I get her gas savings stamps every week. She's too proud to go on supplementary, so she saves up for her bill that way."

But she couldn't understand why the showrooms might have to close. "What can I do about it?" she asked. "I'd like to tell that Thatcher what I think of her stupid plans."

We told her that might be a good idea, and she might like to tell a few more people besides about what may happen — her friends and neighbours, her local councillor, her MP, or even write to her local councillor, her MP, or even write to her local paper. And she promised to have a go.

The Gas Board has millions of customers like her, and if they all saw it her way they would be able to change the government's mind.

Stop them robbing the nation's gas meter

"The Government's struggle to introduce some measure of private enterprise into the British Gas Corporation has lasted since it took office. Having failed so far to prise away the Corporation's oil interests it is now putting pressure on it to sell its 1100 High Street Showrooms."

from the NEW STANDARD, 27 May 1981

Six years ago British Gas owed the government over £1,650 million. Not only has this debt been repaid, but in 1979 British Gas became the first nationalised industry to lend money to the government.

This year the government imposed a levy on British Gas — £1,300 million will have to be paid out by March 1983. This cash could have been used for long term exploration to make up for the loss when the North Sea gasfields begin to run down.

This government forced British Gas to increase its charges to customers to bring them in line with electricity. Now that the Gas Board is making a profit, the Government wants to take away its most profitable trade. It would seem that the Government's interests are not the same as those of gas consumers and the Gas Board itself.





Gaspoint

- **No more showrooms, higher prices and poorer servicing**
- **Unions fear 30.000 jobs loss**
- **Takeover will threaten high safety standards**

How Bromley gas works

**500 JOBS
UNDER
THREAT**

In Bromley-by-Bow, beside the River Lea which runs through the heart of London's East End, is one of the largest warehouses of its kind in Europe.

This is the nerve centre of North Thames Gas, a vast stores, transport and service depot which services customers from Windsor in Berkshire to Canvey Island in Essex.

For generations the East End has supplied the workforce at Bromley, which along with nearby Beckton was the largest gas producing works in Europe before the advent of natural gas.

In many ways this depot provides clear evidence of the importance of a unified gas industry, combining the economies of scale with the expertise and efficiency which comes from years of know-how.

Gas Board cookers, fires and refrigerators are tested and stored here before distribution, as are millions of spare parts, steel, copper, meter fittings, and vast quantities of pipes for gas mains, tools and safety equipment.

This is also the central vehicle workshop and transport stores for the 3000 vehicles which service the whole region. It has its own vehicle testing centre, and a driving school for everything from small vans to cranes.

The sales and service departments of North

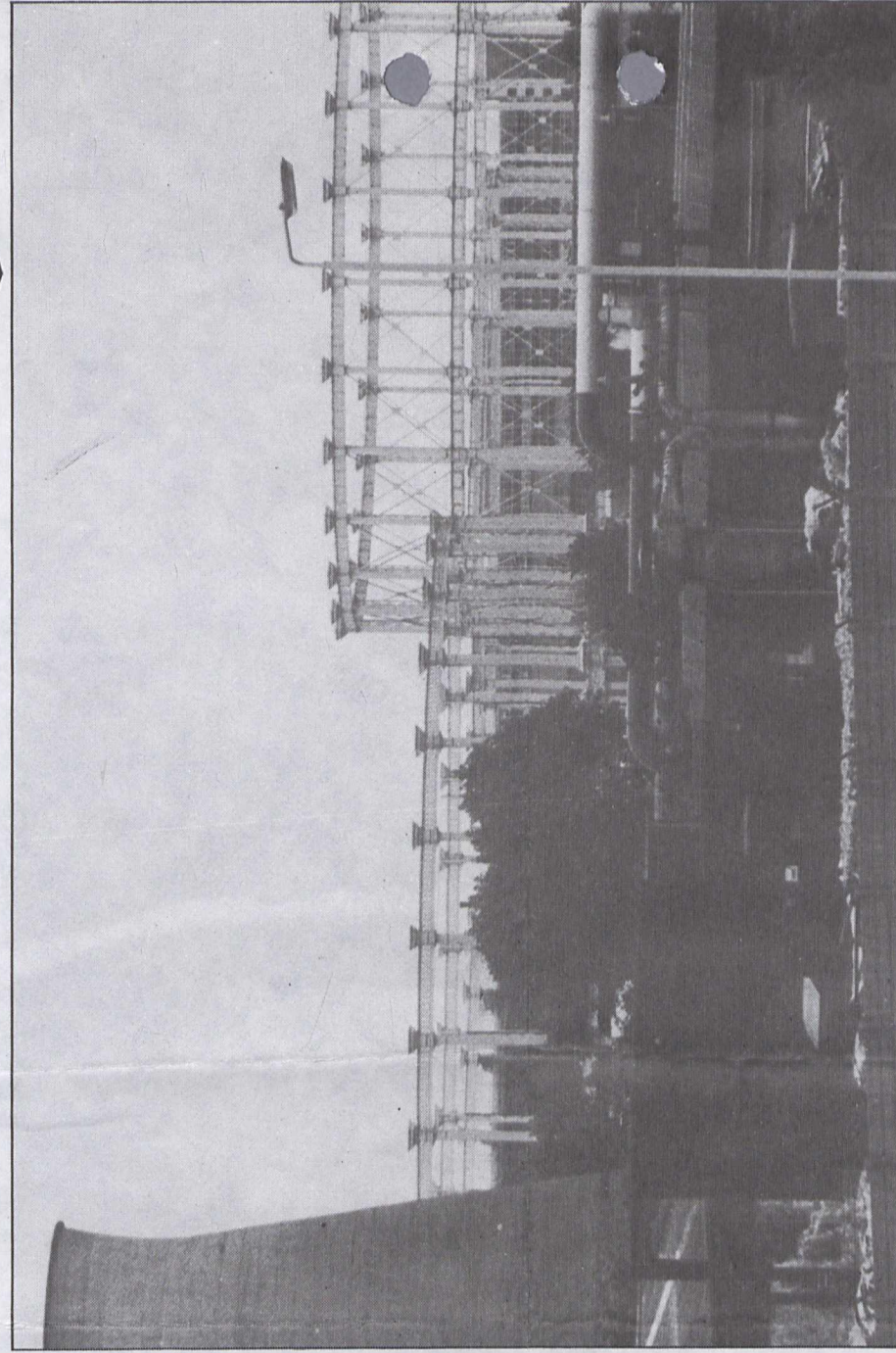
A local nerve centre

Thames Gas can order from Bromley Gas Works through one of the most sophisticated computerised stock control systems in Europe. Any other region in the country can make use of the depot through a mutual exchange system initiated by Bromley employees several years ago.

Yet this whole complex could close down if the Gas Board's retail trade is hived off to private enterprise by the government.

Staff at the Bromley Gas Works have asked the Gas Board to invite MPs, council leaders and community organisations to visit our workplace to see for themselves the massive back up which has been developed to service those millions of customers who use gas in their homes.

They would see how



Bromley Gas Works: a vital service that could face closure.

our maintenance and safety checks are carried out, they would learn that British Gas has the capacity to service any one of 8,500 different gas appliances, and find spare parts of the 34,000,000 appliances currently in use, more than half of which are no longer produced by the original manufacturers.

If they asked the right questions they would discover that this whole operation is regarded as an obligation to the Gas Board's customers.

Much of the work is unprofitable, but the Gas Board and its employees believe that, as the supplier of a basic fuel, they have a social responsibility to ensure that consu-

mers receive a comprehensive service.

Quaint old notions about Gas Works would be quickly dispelled by a visit to depots like Bromley, and the people who own them, every taxpayer in the country, would realise just how serious a threat denationalisation is to things which we all take for

granted. Bromley Gas Works has a proud tradition which has kept up with the demands of modern living — we cannot let it die.

It is not just jobs which are at stake, it is the well-being of the community and the safety and security of gas consumers everywhere.

Gas chairman speaks out



SIR DENIS ROOKE, Chairman of the British Gas Corporation, has been criticised in Parliament for defending British Gas interests.

Although his own contract has now been extended, he was attacked for publishing a four-page newspaper explaining the Monopolies Commission report to employees, and spending money on a major television advertising campaign.

He has repeatedly said that "if a fight is necessary the Corporation will fight."

In a long statement to his employees, Sir Denis wrote "I cannot believe that the best interests of 14 million showroom customers are going to be served by the wholesale disposals or closure of gas showrooms and the forcible withdrawal of British Gas from appliance retailing."

He said that he had been "heartened by the traditional loyalty" of the workforce over a period when their future was in doubt and he laid stress on the fact that neither the Monopolies Commission nor the Prices Commission Report had criticised their performance.

Now you can take action

IF YOU are worried by what you have read in GASPOINT, here are some things you could do to help prevent the breaking up of British Gas.

Write a letter to:

- Sally Oppenheim MP, Consumer Affairs Minister, or your own MP at the House of Commons, Westminster, SW1A 0AA;
- Sir Denis Rooke, Chairman of the British Gas Corporation, 59 Bryanston Street, W.1.
- North Thames Gas Consumers Council, 28 Charing Cross Road, WC2,
- your local councillors at the Town Hall.

Get together with friends and neighbours, at your tenants association or trades union branch, or in any group to which you belong, discuss the issues raised in GASPOINT and organise your own form of opposition to the Government's proposal.

The gas workers union will be keen to hear from you and willing to come and explain in more detail.

East End News

GASPOINT was produced for gas workers by the *East End News*, the first local newspaper in the country owned and run by its readers.

The *East End News* has also helped publish Month of Action News for the South East Regional TUC the Official Souvenir of the People's March for Jobs, NALGO's monthly Metropolitan District News and offers full journal-

istic and design services to all trade unions.

It has assisted with the production of East London History Society's Record and has just published Drawn from the East End, a collection of illustrations, cartoons and artwork (£1 from East End News).

For more information write to: EEN, 17 Victoria Park Square, Bethnal Green, London E2 9PE.