

Britain's fuel tax protests come to a sorry end

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16 November 2000

Anti-fuel tax campaigners in Britain ended their four-day convoy on Tuesday, with small protests in Edinburgh and London.

Vilified by the media, hounded by the police and abandoned by their fair-weather friends in the major haulage associations and oil corporations, the events were a subdued, even sad affair.

The campaigners, mainly small farmers and hauliers organized in ad-hoc groups such as the People's Fuel Lobby (PFL), are seeking an across-the-board reduction in Britain's fuel taxes, which that are the highest in Europe. After protests outside fuel depots in September had led many areas in Britain to run out of petrol, campaigners called a 60-day moratorium to allow Chancellor Gordon Brown to address their concerns in his mini-budget on Wednesday November 15, or face renewed action.

Concerned at the level of public sympathy the protests were able to win, the government and the media has utilised the last few weeks to mount a black propaganda campaign—denouncing the fuel-protestors as selfish and grasping right-wing extremists out to overthrow democracy in Britain.

A barrage of repressive law-and-order measures backed this up. The government announced that some 1,000 troops had been specially trained to drive fuel lorries if civilian drivers refused to do so, and that those protestors deemed to be breaking the law would face arrest and even the loss of their operators license.

To rub salt in the wound, Brown announced some minimal concessions in his budget speech aimed at splitting the anti-fuel tax lobby. Pitching his package at the more financially sound sections of the farming and haulage industry, Brown also spelt out his opposition to demands that the major oil companies should be more heavily taxed on their record profits in order to cut levels of indirect taxation.

Not surprisingly, many of the campaigners rejected Brown's package and pressed ahead with the threatened convoy from the North East to London. Although they

had made plain that they did not intend any disruption, the four-day convoy—comprising between 30 and 80 vehicles—faced constant harassment.

Only allowed to travel along major arterial routes and barred from most towns and city centres, by Saturday the convoy was already 24 hours ahead of schedule. Not only had they been banned from Manchester and Leeds, the heavy police escort accompanying them imposed a minimum 50-mile per hour speed on convoy drivers or face arrest.

In the West Midlands, police recorded the license numbers of protesters' vehicles and made them carry identifying stickers—a yellow piece of paper with a black square in the middle—which some compared to the Jewish star symbol enforced by Hitler's Nazi's. Others claimed that plain-clothes police were filming them.

Even before the convoy had left the North East, the Blair government said they would not be able to enter the capital, as police would enforce an exclusion zone. Police Commissioner Sir John Stevens said police checkpoints around London would enforce a ban on lorries entering the City. The government justified these measures on the grounds of “security concerns”—namely that “terrorists could infiltrate the convoy”—holding up as evidence the apparent discovery of a bomb in Northern Ireland, supposedly destined for London.

Just outside London, hauliers and farmers from Wales and the South of England joined the convoy, slowly making its way into London. By this time, the plan for an exclusion zone had been dropped—after the small size of the convoy became apparent and in face of complaints that it contravened human rights legislation. Nonetheless, 300 to 400 vehicles were forced to park up in West London before protestors made their way on foot to Hyde Park for the rally. After some negotiations, it was agreed that a tractor, a Land Rover, and one articulated lorry would be allowed to proceed to Downing Street. Whilst agreeing to this concession, the government was in talks with the main hauliers association.

The Scottish convoy did not fare much better. Totalling

130 vehicles, it set out on Monday from starting points such as John O'Groats to meet up in central Edinburgh at the same time the London protest was to converge. But the Scottish National Farmers Union, the Scottish Trade Union Congress and the Scottish Road Haulage Association opposed the protest. Labour controlled Dundee City Council refused permission for the vehicles to drive along the main A90 Kingsway in one large group and an unsuccessful legal appeal by protestors against their decision, saw the convoy broken into smaller clusters.

In Edinburgh on Tuesday afternoon, just a single "symbolic vehicle" was allowed to present a petition to the Scottish Parliament.

The protestors seemed bewildered by their treatment. Their campaign against high fuel duty levels had been treated as if it were the greatest danger facing Britain since the threatened Nazi invasion in World War II. But although mocked by those such as *Guardian* cartoonist Steve Bell as "fat blokes" or "greedy profiteers", many of the protestors were relatively apolitical and motivated only by the serious financial difficulties they face. Small hauliers and farmers have seen their fuel bills increase by more than one-third in the last year, threatening them with bankruptcy. In consequence, suicides amongst farmers are now running at a record level.

One journalist reported that Labour had commissioned its allies in the media to do a "hatchet job" on the PFL leaders—digging up information of their "wealthy lifestyles", etc. This was dropped after it emerged that David Handley, a dairy farmer and PFL's most prominent spokesman, was reportedly more than £50,000 in debt and facing outstanding county court judgements.

At the London rally, Handley announced he would stand down as head of the PFL whilst convoy leader Andrew Spence said he was considering his position. The two, depicted by the media as shady political conspirators, said they felt out of their depth.

By Tuesday evening, the government and media were congratulating themselves for defeating the protests and restoring order. In what passes for political analysis some commentators speculated that with hindsight, the government appeared to have "overestimated" the protestors' strength and as a result, used a sledgehammer to crack a nut.

But this only indicates just how unstable and inherently volatile political and social relations have become behind the media-created façade of the "popular" Blair government. That is why a small, disparate group of anti-

fuel tax campaigners were able to command widespread, albeit passive, public sympathy. It is the same reason why such a limited single-issue protest was enough to puncture the illusion and send the government and its media allies into a spin.

Lacking any significant base of support, the Blair government responded to the perceived danger to its rule in the same way as every isolated elite throughout history—it panicked and lashed out. In order to stifle the fuel protests, the right to protest in Britain was effectively outlawed. Utilising the Conservative's 1986 Public Order Act, the government claimed that only "legitimate" protest are allowed, i.e. those which it had determined would not impinge unduly on the economic and political interests of the ruling elite.

Because the protests only ever involved a small group of people, with no broad political aims or vision, these tactics were successful. But Blair and his cheerleaders in the media may yet have occasion to reconsider their present triumphalism. The state's aggressive treatment of a group of small businessmen will only further alienate working people from a government that is seen to be indifferent to the growing financial hardship facing millions.

See Also:

Britain's pro-business mini-budget means no real concessions on either fuel taxes or pensions
[10 November 2000]

British government employs black propaganda and threats against fuel tax protestors
[8 November 2000]



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