

A Victory for People Power

British poll tax attacked

Alice Detroit

a review of

Poll Tax Rebellion by Danny Burns, Photographs by Mark Simmons, AK Press, Stirling, Scotland and Attack International, London, 202 pp.

Imagine the euphoria of making a government back down! Danny Burns' vivid 200-page account of the popular and widespread rebellion against the British poll tax warms the heart.

At the end of the 1980s, the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher felt its power was secure enough to institute a new tax invented by a right-wing think tank. This was a flat tax independent of one's income. It went into effect in Scotland in April 1989 and in England and Wales a year later.

The tax was the same for everyone living in an administrative district, but the sum varied from district to district. It was not a trivial amount, and the inequity caused widespread indignation. For many people, paying the tax meant they couldn't eat. Newspapers frequently gave examples of the inequities and a number are cited in this book. For example, the Duke of Westminster, whose tax on his estate used to be £10,255 learned that his new tax was £417, exactly the same amount as his housekeeper and resident chauffeur had to pay.

Several million Britons disobeyed the law and refused to pay. This massive refusal forced the Conservative Party leaders to promise to rescind the tax. However, they didn't cancel the tax for the years it was in effect, so non-payers are still liable for taxes in 1989–91. (See adjacent brief article about continuing refusals and defense of poll tax prisoners.)

To be effective, the fight against the government's tax decree had to involve large numbers of people. This story is heartening because millions not only failed to pay the tax, they flaunted their refusal. Burning tax bills publicly at local protest demonstrations was a commitment not to pay. Sit-ins took place in municipal chambers and angry groups disrupted sessions where tax rates were being fixed. Strikes were threatened against employers who considered deducting the tax from wages.

The Justice of Their Actions

If a bailiff with a court order was sent to attach a non-payer's property, neighbors would assemble en masse to prevent his entering the premises. Phone trees spread the news quickly.

Burns' account suggests that people spent little time in meetings; most of the organizing took place on neighborhood streets. No workshops were given on how to practice solidarity; it came naturally.

The resisters were utterly convinced of the justice of their actions, and were willing to face a variety of Her Majesty's forces of law and order. They justified what they did by citing historical precedents: the 1381 peasant revolts in England, the American colonists' tax refusal in the 1700s, and the 1915 rent strikes in Glasgow.

Open and aggressive resistance to the law enforcers was seen in many cities: during demonstrations, people rescued friends from the police and attacked cops with bottles and stones.

The most violent confrontation occurred on March 31, 1990 (a year after the tax was first imposed in Scotland) in and around London's Trafalgar Square. Even though the police knew that the location was too small to hold the masses of demonstrators (200,000 of them), they refused them access to a larger area. Resisters paid a heavy toll in injuries and jailings, but the cops did not emerge unscathed. Property damage was enormous (especially to luxury cars and shops).

This book is more than a chronology. Burns analyzes the political implications of the drama and traces three possible ways the resistance might have been sidetracked. He then explains how the dead-ends came to be avoided.

PITFALL 1. Many politically active people expected the Labour Party to champion resistance to the tax. They have the media, spokespersons and organization and could have effectively prevented collection of the tax. But their desire to administrate (tax) agencies themselves took precedence over any desire to champion a popular cause.

They feared—rightly—that individuals who broke Tory law would be likely to break Labour law as well. In the end, Labour Party organizers advocated nothing more threatening than writing to representatives in Parliament. Seemingly without hesitation, poll tax resisters turned their backs on these Labour Party hacks and launched the “We won't pay” campaign.

PITFALL 2. The leftist political group Militant, had influence over the tax resisters—at least, in the beginning. Their approach to organizing was extremely bureaucratic, and Burns documents people's dismay at meeting time spent in electing officers, choosing delegates and arranging operating rules. Familiar leftist (Leninist) shenanigans were displayed in Militant's attempts to lead the national movement.

The reader is happy to learn how resisters circumvented such obstacles. Burns concludes his account of Militant deviousness with this analysis:

“The Anti-Poll Tax campaign was not seriously damaged by political manipulation in the federations because it was a resistance campaign. Unlike protest campaigns which are dependent on media impact and electoral success, this campaign was solely dependent on the actions of local people organized into local groups. Because there were so many people involved, the political factions simply didn't have the numbers to make a difference at a local level. And because people felt that they were in control, they stayed involved. This made the movement strong and highly resistant to political corruption.”

PITFALL 3. Following the 1990 Trafalgar Square demonstration, two of the demonstration's organizers denounced the violence committed by some of the protesters; they promised an investigation and said that persons found guilty would be expelled. This threat from the organizers had a demoralizing effect, especially for the 500 people arrested who were expecting organizational support.

But then these leaders were just ignored as Labour Party and Militant ones had been.

People shrugged off the leaders' denunciatory statements and formed a Trafalgar Square Defendant's Campaign which was committed unconditionally to defend everyone who was arrested. Dave Morris, one of the group's organizers, explained this position:

“You can't say, we support these people and not those people, or we support these people a bit and those people a lot. The consequences of this would have been disastrous. The most important aspect of a defendants' campaign is not setting one group off another. You can't create an organization, a struggle, a campaign without a strong feeling of solidarity, unity and mutual respect. You can't say the ones who were “innocent,” i.e., framed, are more important than the ones who were “guilty,” but were actually defending themselves, and that they are both more important than those who hate the police anyway, because of their experience.”

If some people hate the police that much that they want to have a go at them at every opportunity, that's not because they're born that way, or they're sent from Mars, it's because the police have created that feeling in the population by the way they have acted.

Reasons for Success

Danny Burns attributes the movement's success largely to the fact that it had no prominent leaders. It was a collective effort and neither work or decision-making was delegated.

Also it was clear from the beginning that it was pointless to work within the system—and little energy was wasted in “appropriate channels.”

Commitment to a shared cause formed bonds between individuals who recognized that success depended on others standing firm. The good times and social interaction that result are uncommon experiences in today’s world. Their appearance in England, Scotland and Wales is cause for hope.

Three cheers for Danny Burns, Mark Simmons (whose great photos add depth to the story) and the millions of people who made this story possible.

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See “Tory Government Retreats,” this issue (FE #340, Autumn 1992).

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