

Mondeo Man and the Politics of Petrol

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No-one doubts that there were serious issues at the heart of the recent UK fuel dispute. The social and economic pressures upon British farming have been clear for some time. Likewise, the dispute threw the particular difficulties of the UK road haulage industry into sharp relief. However, stepping aside from these issues, this article considers two wider but related questions raised by the dispute. These concern, firstly, the construction of the dispute as a conflict within the 'sphere of consumption' (avoiding wider questions about the power and profits of the oil companies themselves) and, secondly, the ways in which a wider public opinion became mobilised during the dispute, posing serious questions for UK fiscal policy.

Moaning all the way to the pumps

A week is said to be a long time in politics and yet, by the same token, 30 minutes is an inconceivably long time to spend in a queue at a petrol station. However, during early September 2000, the motorists queuing for fuel appeared to endorse the actions of the fuel protesters responsible for the inconvenience. Power cuts had never been so popular. Reminiscent of the poll tax rebellions in the late 1980s, the British appeared to be rediscovering active political culture. Admittedly this activism may have been confined to a little more than two and a half thousand actual protesters - the rest perhaps restricting their protests to grumbling behind their windscreens, honking their horns 'in support', or panic-buying their petrol. The oil companies found themselves in the comfortable position of having fuel consumers lobbying on their behalf, seemingly with the populist support of a large majority of those very consumers whose lives were being disrupted by the petrol shortages. There was a good deal of truth in the Trade Union Congress depiction of the fuel protest as 'a world turned upside down' - although the unions were effectively sidelined for much of the dispute.

It was undoubtedly an unusual week and, in managing the crisis, the government did appear to be caught on the hop. They had no strategy, nor had they taken seriously the way in which the blockading would rapidly spread. On Day 2, after Tony Blair's assurance that the fuel would be flowing once more had proven hopelessly optimistic, the Government were always playing catch-up. More importantly, ministers had not anticipated the tacit support that petrol companies would give to the blockade activists. Bill Morris, leader of the Transport and General Workers' Union, argued that oil companies and the police had colluded with protesters during the fuel blockades. In some cases fuel protesters had been given access to depots and refineries to talk to drivers even though trade unions had been refused access. (Milne, 2000). Equally, the Government had not anticipated the reluctance of the police to take enforcement action against the blockading truckers. When protesters first appeared at the Stanlow depot in Cheshire, TGWU members working there had advised managers they would work normally if they were given police escorts, but no such support was forthcoming. In marked contrast with other recent industrial disputes or political protests, police appeared extraordinarily reluctant to intervene, even in the face of evidence of the intimidation of lorry drivers or in regarding the obstruction of highways. One of the Home Secretary's aides, Lord Mackenzie, a former senior policeman, expressed his astonishment that petrol tankers were not leaving their fuel depots. "The people who are demonstrating, in a sense, I suppose, are supporters of the Conservative party. There's something not right about it. It's not a normal demonstration." He went on to add that many protests were so minimal that they could not be regarded as picketing. "Roads are often not blocked - if they were, the police would not hesitate in arresting people." A more convincing explanation, he said, was that "the oil companies [themselves] were causing the difficulty, there does seem some collusion with the protesters. Perhaps it's because if the fuel duty was reduced they would sell more petrol." (Hetherington and Denny, 2000) Most significant of all, however, and certainly the most politically damaging in the longer term, was the Government's underestimate of the levels of public support that the blockade activists would receive. By the end of

the dispute Tony Blair received his lowest ever opinion poll ratings and, for the first time since the 1997 election, the Conservatives stood four points ahead of Labour.

However, as the country waited for the protesters' 60-day ultimatum to run down, a range of political, economic and ideological issues began emerge. The bigger issues behind the discontent leading to the oil refinery blockades directly concerned the organisation and financial structuring of the petrol business and the frequently quite difficult relationships between the petrol companies and government revenue raising. It was true that consumer taxes had been pushing up UK fuel prices faster than the rising dollar price of oil. However, the reason for this was the introduction, during the early 1990s of the 'fuel tax escalator', which led to increased year on year petrol duties as the price of fuel increased. This arrangement was introduced by the then conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer, Norman Lamont, part of a wider government fiscal strategy to shift the burden of taxation from direct income taxation to the indirect taxation of consumer spending.

Big Oil Profits and Taxation

At the time, the introduction of the 'escalator' was justified, in part, on environmental grounds, higher petrol prices would act to discourage private car journey's, encourage more people to consider using public transport and reduce exhaust emissions, thereby benefiting the environment. The motorist's pain would be the environment's gain. However, while the tax revenues were very welcome in the Treasury, there was scarcely any evidence that higher fuel costs were putting people off driving. Researchers at the Institute for Fiscal Studies estimated that a 10% increase in the cost of driving would reduce the number of miles driven by private car owners by less than 5%, most of the time car owners would just - grumbling all the way to the filling station - absorb the increased cost. (Blow and Crawford, 2000) Furthermore, an across the board increase in price is a rather blunt instrument - people living in rural areas where public transport was virtually non-existent complained angrily that, in their areas, a car was not a luxury item but essential for getting around, particularly as rural facilities - post offices, banks and schools - were closed down. Attempts to reduce reliance on the car by increasing the cost of fuel have not been very successful. The evidence from the UK appears to bear this out. The annual number of miles driven has risen each year since the introduction of the escalator, despite rising petrol costs. In 1990 British drivers clocked up a total of 253bn miles between them. Ten years later this had risen by 12% to 284bn. (Denny, 2000) These fiscal arrangements, however, appeared to satisfy no-one but the Treasury. The green lobby have complained that the additional tax revenue ought to be devoted to researching more environmentally friendly sources of energy or into subsidising (and therefore increase the use of) public transport. On the other hand, motoring organisations argue that if fuel taxes must be levied, then the proceeds ought to be spent on tackling congestion on the roads and improving safety and local transport links. Instead, the money disappeared into the Treasury, presumably to expand the Chancellor's election war-chest.

However, despite these political tensions concerning both the social consequences of high fuel taxation and disputes about how the money was to be used, there was always rather more to it. The increased levels of taxation paid by fuel consumers can be contrasted with the surprisingly low rates of taxation paid by the oil extraction companies. Marcus Miller, Professor of Economics at Warwick University, demonstrates that "when (North Sea) oil company profits were running at peak levels in the mid-1980s, the government tax-take was about £12 billion per year (a share of about 60% of company profits). But when company profits peaked again at about £16 billion in 1996-7, the tax-take had fallen to less than £4 billion, ie. these companies were only paying a quarter of gross profits in tax." (Miller, 2000) Such a highly favourable tax regime relating to North Sea oil companies was a result of deliberate government policy. When the world price of oil was falling the Government accepted the need to treat investment in oil extraction and the discovery of new oil fields in a very generous light. Low taxation was an inducement to investment in the industry. At the same time, taxation at the point of consumption was thought likely (although, as it turned out, inaccurately) to curb demand. Such arrangements had an economic rationale, of sorts, when the world's crude oil prices were low but, during the late 1990s, as OPEC began to restrict the supply of oil onto the world markets, causing the price of crude oil to more than treble and oil company profits to soar, the complaint began to surface that oil companies were quick to hold onto profits but even quicker to

pass on costs. When the cost of crude oil rose, the price of petrol at the pumps rose too, but when the price of crude fell on world markets, the price of petrol still went up.

In many respects, such outcomes were an inevitable consequence of the ways in which the oil business is organised. The exploration and extraction of crude oil are a financially separate set of business operations to the distribution and sale of petrol and the maintenance of a network of petrol stations. A skewed internal market operates. Oil extraction companies are able to make vast profits, in part the consequence of a highly favourable tax regime - oil companies pay virtually no taxation on the extraction of the crude oil - but then they set an artificially high sell-on price for the supply of crude oil to refineries. All the refinement, marketing and distribution costs (including those involved in the running of petrol stations) are carried by the supply arm of the business. Fuel supply companies in the UK complained that they made only marginal profits on the sale of petrol, blaming the taxman's share of the eventual forecourt prices. Uneconomic petrol stations were closed, the tax man was blamed. Shell recently shutdown 120 service stations in Britain on the grounds that they do not make enough money, a fact which sits rather oddly alongside the Shell group's overall profits of nearly £4.5bn in the first half of the year. An equally important cause of these tight profit margins on the petrol industry distribution-side concerned the high prices charged for the sale of crude oil to refineries.

When the Labour Government considered reviewing the tax regime applying to crude oil extraction in the North Sea in 1997-98, oil companies objected and the Government backed off. Instead, facing growing criticism on the seemingly more visible question of the proportion of fuel prices taken in tax, Gordon Brown abolished the fuel tax escalator in early 1999. Unfortunately for the government, this was not enough to forestall growing criticism and, likewise, Tony Blair's argument that over three quarters of recent petrol price increases could be attributed to the rapidly rising price of crude oil on world markets, largely fell on deaf ears. Instead the political spotlight remained focussed on the distributional question - at the petrol pump - whilst way back along the supply chain the oil companies quietly pocketed their huge and largely untaxed profits. Just one small reminder of the real balance of economic power in the fuel industry surfaced as the petrol supplies resumed: Esso and a number of other fuel companies, running true to their 'fat-cat' image, added 2p per litre to the price of petrol. In the face of intense public outrage and government astonishment at such a crass public relations 'own goal' the price increase was withdrawn - for the time being.

Consumer resistance

In the face of rising petrol prices, the first signs of organised consumer resistance attempted to target the "profiteering petrol companies". However, the so-called 'Dump the Pump' campaign, during the early Summer 2000, which sought to persuade motorists to boycott filling stations on a Wednesday generated a very disappointing response. Subsequent attempts to shift the focus to a boycott of BP, in the hope that BP would apply its leverage in Westminster, were overtaken by the broader dispute. The protests were undoubtedly planned as little more than token, after all, motorists who didn't fill up on Wednesday would still have to do so on Thursday. They were not committing to purchase less petrol. They were over a barrel, committed consumers and perhaps they knew it, demand for petrol has been shown to be relatively inelastic. Reluctant to bite the hand that supplied, especially while the object of complaint concerned the unjustly inflated 'price' of fuel, 'Dump the Pump' campaigners couldn't get the addicts to break free of their dealers. This was a peculiarly English protest after all. We were not acting like the volatile French, still less the protesters attempting to 'stop the city' or trash McDonalds. Even when the object of popular discontent shifted to become, not the overall price of fuel, but the proportion of the price made up by taxation there was still an expectation that the stoicism of British voters would mean there will be no repeat of the kind of protests that were paralysing France. A Freight Transport Association spokesman said his members would never take to the streets because "direct action would alienate voters", destroying his group's leverage over the government. "We do not behave like the French, although there are some elements who are interested in pursuing that line out of sheer frustration," he added. Likewise, Labour MP and foreign office aide, Denis Macshane commented, "France has always been prone to sudden sharp

mobilisations because there is not the tradition of debate that we have... In Britain people also seem to have become inured to rises in petrol prices."

New forms of public protest

Or so we thought. One of the interesting issues about the dispute concerned the protesters' discovery, almost by accident, of their own power. Not even the protesters themselves expected to bring the country to a virtual standstill within only a matter of days. New methods of organising the supply of fuel had made the economy as a whole especially vulnerable to a disruption of supply. What the mineworkers came nowhere near accomplishing in 1984-5, during a year long dispute (partly due to the stockpiling of coal at power stations in anticipation of the dispute) less than 3,000 fuel blockaders achieved in a week (although, as has been noted, the police played a rather different role in the two disputes) (Beynon, 1985).

The basic fragility of the economy had not been recognised. Many retail and supply businesses carry astonishingly few reserves. Rather than tie up money in carrying a large stock, supermarkets and petrol stations rely on a system of 'just-in-time' delivery - depending on daily and sometimes even more frequent deliveries to keep their shelves and underground tanks stocked. This works well if the lorries and tankers keep on coming. However, if the lorries don't arrive for two or three days, problems quickly follow. Even so, Britain has around 50 oil supply depots and picketing each was no small achievement. Here the fuel protesters, equipped with mobile phones, relatively unorganised and mobile, were able to demonstrate what had been learned from other, more loosely organised, protest campaigns.

In recent years, the police have become concerned about new protest tactics, they found they could not easily trace or intercept the email and website-linked network behind the 'Stop the City' rioters in the City of London last year. Even so, nobody imagined a group of farmers and road hauliers could network to such rapid destructive effect. However, once it became clear, on the first Monday of the protest, that the blockades were proving effective, the network was able to mobilise sympathisers in the rest of the country. By Monday afternoon the oil companies were issuing warnings that petrol stations would run dry. In turn, this prompted the panic buying, emptying petrol stations even faster. Brynle Williams, the Welsh farmer who co-ordinated the initial protest at Stanlow, acknowledged he was not part of a national campaigning organisation, but rather, 'a network of like-minded people'. And whilst the protesters set the ball rolling, the self-interest of panicky motorists easily did the rest. Indeed, so anxious were UK motorists that subsequent rumours of impending petrol shortages prompted two waves of widespread panic buying, emptying petrol stations around the country faster than they could be refilled, creating new and unnecessary fuel shortages.

So, just-in-time delivery, new methods of protest networking and anxious motorists combined to produce a very 21st century crisis. Managing such a crisis is likely to require some new thinking in a number of government departments. But more fundamentally, if the petrol protests are taken as further evidence of a new politics of (more confrontational) public protest emerging in contemporary Britain, what does this say about the quality of our democracy - indeed, what does it have in store for it?

The quality of democracy

To draw a simple analogy, if the British political system were itself a motor vehicle, would it be a finely-tuned and smooth running machine requiring high-grade inputs and capable of withstanding the pot holes of contemporary politics, or would it be some inefficient, gas-guzzling and smoke belching tractor engine running on cheap, two star populism? In the week of the fuel crisis, we seemed to get our answer. In an earlier age, when political solidarities fell largely along the simple lines of class, this may not have mattered so much, but in our new situation it spells instability. Hugo Young, writing recently in the Guardian, characterised the contemporary electorate in scathing terms,

"A number of epithets fit the electorate that has evolved from the tribal, committed body of half a century ago... cynical, disbelieving, fickle, grasping, materialistic, self-centred, loose, materialistic." He doubted the capacity of the British to recognise their own real interests, let alone the greater good. (Young, 2000) Ros Coward, in the same newspaper, linked the support voiced in favour of the fuel tax protests to a broader 'feel-bad' factor. "Everyone is fed up about something, whether it is stealth taxes, the risk of bankruptcy, commuter chaos, extreme weather or fears about food contamination." These collected discontents built up and the fuel protest allowed for a sudden release of tension. The reason that this particular issue struck such a powerful chord relates back to our contemporary mass psychology of the car. Even though the fuel blockades would further inconvenience motorists, all motorists shared at some level the frustrations felt by the farmers and truckers. No one was happy. According to Coward, the car is often seen - indeed, it is marketed this way - as an aspect of the individual. "Modern car designs ... emphasise convenience and comfort, allowing car users to seal themselves off from outside discomforts. Even traffic jams seem preferable to the powerlessness caused by disrupted, uncomfortable rail journeys. The car feels like an outer skin, a place where you make your own choices about when to travel and which route to take... the car symbolises comfort, convenience and freedom for the self." (Coward, 2000) Compare this to the indignities of rail journeys, trying to get a bus in rural areas, the dangers of cycling - let alone walking. What if the protesters were likely to cause some disruption, at least they were doing something.

Reluctantly in the driving seat of the vanguard of reaction

Unfortunately, rather than addressing the underlying issues, the fuel protest instead gave expression to a broadside of single issue selfishness in which the real issues risked being lost in a fog of petty-bourgeois reaction and partisan posturing. Part of the problem here lay in the way that supporters and critics alike lumped the two primary groups of protagonists - farmers and truckers - and then ordinary motorists as well, together. Leaving aside for the moment the opportunist bandwagon-jumping of the private motorists - if someone was going to get cheaper fuel, they wanted some too - the two primary groups each had their own longstanding grievances to air. A number of issues relating back to the politics of farming and to the economics of road haulage helped galvanise both farmers and truckers into action on the single question of fuel taxation.

There is no doubt that British farming has been feeling marginalised and misunderstood for some time. The recent emergence of a Countryside lobby has gained a good deal of attention over a number of symbolic issues (fox hunting, the BSE crisis, and the inadequacies of rural services like post-offices and public transport) but there is no doubt that at its core lies a problem of the declining profitability of traditional small-scale farming. On this broadly 'economic' reading of the crisis in rural life, concerns about the price of diesel fuel were no small matter.

As in the French fuel disputes, farmers were prominent amongst the blockade organisers. Even so, they were anxious to distance themselves from the French whose protest tactics had cost British farmers dearly in the recent past. According to Brynle Williams, vice-chairman of the Farmers' Union of Wales and one of the organisers of the protests, "We are not here to mimic the French farmers - that is not our ambition - we just want the government to take action. The reason they are not interested is because farmers only form 2% of the electorate - perhaps this will change if we involve more people." Other farming spokesmen said that the spring diesel price increases - which could cost farmers as much as an extra £80 a week - were a kick in the teeth when they were already at their lowest ebb. "Fuel prices are like the final nail in the coffin for farmers ... Our profit margins have already been cut back to the bone. Everything comes down to fuel prices in the end and it affects us in so many ways. We have had so many crises in farming, but this has put the top hat on it for us."

The second key group of activists in the blockades were the road hauliers themselves. In one respect the hauliers' complaint about fuel pricing, specifically the tax burden on diesel fuel, was similar to the complaint of the farmers - Britain was said to have the highest transport costs in the world and our own road haulage industry was said to be uncompetitive. Truckers specifically criticised foreign 'cowboy' drivers for undercutting their business, although government estimates suggested that less than 1% of UK road freight transport was carried by foreign registered lorries. Industry commentators argued that there was 20% overcapacity in the UK Road Freight industry and

profit margins were accordingly very tight. As in the case of the farmers, this, again largely economic, reading of the transport industry's problems sparked questions about operating costs in the industry but despite these wider issues the spotlight once again fell upon the price of diesel. During the dispute, the most active hauliers were those from small firms, franchised out, subcontracted and non-unionised. Their weak position put them outside normal channels of governmental lobbying - either the Freight Transport Association or the TGWU - and this left them with few avenues, other than direct action, for getting their message across. In the event, however, this did not turn out to be a source of weakness but rather the basis of their particular strength.

Ironically, one particular aspect of the organisation of the road haulage industry also explained why a relatively small number of protesters could paralyse an entire industry - and, in turn the whole economy. Most oil companies had contracted out their petrol delivery to low-cost independent road hauliers who, during the dispute, largely sympathised with the protesters' cause. Equally, the oil companies had very little leverage over the hauliers and little commitment from them, perhaps they did not deserve any. Some fuel company fleet drivers had even been sacked only to be re-employed as independents for less pay. There were allegations of threats and intimidation at the blockades, and the police taking a very low key stance. Hauliers were loathe to take any risks for companies which, in their continuing pursuit of lower overheads, had displayed no loyalty towards them.

Global warming - protest damping

A final factor in the fuel dispute concerns the almost complete absence of a critical environmental perspective from the debate. While protesters took to the streets of Prague to demonstrate against an exploitative capitalist consumerism strangling the life out of third world economies, western car culture had quite other ideas. Offered a choice between siding with the 'responsible' social market economy of the Blair government or pole position in the queue on 'Big Oil's' forecourt, motorists chose the petrol companies every time. Yet, while Britain counted down the days of the blockaders' 60 day ultimatum, Southern Britain began to experience extreme weather conditions and the Home Counties, Yorkshire and the Severn Valley began to flood. Suddenly, global warming was back on everyone's lips and, slowly but surely, we began to follow the problematic exhaust emissions back to their source.

Britain's severe autumn weather put the environmental questions back on the agenda but the argument had been entirely lost during the fuel dispute itself. Green activists have subsequently argued that the fuel protest was a real setback for saner environmental policies. More disturbingly, the absence of a Green voice in the debate may just indicate the limited purchase that such ideas have in mainstream British thinking. A Fabian Society pamphlet by Michael Jacobs explored New Labour's dilemma. "New Labour identifies strongly... with ordinary families and their desires to get on in life. It sees environmentalism as at best an irrelevance to ordinary people, at worst as actively hostile to them... Middle England drives cars, enjoys shopping, wants material things and more foreign holidays." (Jacobs, 1999) While acknowledging that global warming and the environment are major issues to be addressed strategically there was an equally pressing pragmatic requirement - always felt more acutely in the year before an election - to keep motorists, truckers and the Daily Mail off its back.

However, in the context of the dispute, the specific complaint of the green lobby concerning fuel tax revenues concerned the Treasury's failure to use them to develop more environmentally friendly sources of energy or public transport. Even UK motoring organisations, the AA and RAC, have argued that if 'discouraging' fuel taxes must be levied, then the proceeds ought to be spent on tackling congestion on the roads and improving local transport links.

Despite the 60 day ultimatum, the Government made it clear that they would not be bullied into concessions. All reading from the same script, ministers reiterated the words of Stephen Byers, the Trade and Industry Secretary, "questions of taxation are decided in the Budget. They are not decided by blockades in the streets." A cut in fuel tax of the size demanded by the protesters would cost the treasury over £2 billion, Gordon Brown didn't deny the money was there but doubted the wisdom of

blowing it all on cheaper fuel. Although it scarcely seemed like it at the time, some respite came in the form of the pre-Budget Pensioners' Protest. The pensioners, far more familiar Labour adversaries, made it clear that there were many deserving causes competing for Gordon Brown's ear. One of the 'pensioner activists' put it quite bluntly, "there are 11 million of us and only a few thousand truckers." By early November an ICM poll for the Guardian revealed a clear majority supporting the claims of the pensioners (56%) over those of the fuel protesters (36%). (Maguire, 2000) The impetus behind the fuel dispute seemed to be ebbing away.

Nevertheless, the Government began gearing up to respond to the threat of renewed fuel blockades. New police powers and special emergency duties were contemplated in what Observer journalists described as one of the biggest and most sophisticated operations of its kind run by a British government in peace time. (Burke et al., 2000) But as the contingency planning progressed, the force behind the protests began to dissipate. The CBI, while supporting a reduction in fuel taxes warned against any further economic disruption. William Hague, for the Conservative opposition, while blaming the Government for precipitating the crisis refused to condone illegal blockades. Anxious to appeal to the masses, Michael Portillo, the shadow chancellor, had announced a proposal to reduce fuel duty by 3p a litre although, when the AA announced that the cut would save 'Mondeo Man' only 11 pence a day, the gesture was lost. Then, even the protest leaders themselves began to offer reassurances that they intended no further disruption. Indeed, with the rail network in chaos, widespread flooding and continuing bad weather, there were those who wondered whether any additional disruption could be possible. In the event, the ending of the protesters' 60 day ultimatum brought no further fuel blockades. The Chancellor, while not promising much in his Budget statement, had done enough. The steam had gone out of the protesters' cause. At times the truckers' protest Jarrow Convoy (a name that incensed many who had participated in the original march) dwindled to as few as a dozen vehicles and, although over 2,000 eventually made it to the London Rally in early November, virtually everyone involved recognised that the game was up.

Muck, Brass and Petrol: The politics of self-interest

In 1990 professor Richard Rose attempted to research the changing map of British political affiliations. His survey revealed the, by now familiar, fragmentation of older political alliances based upon class, socio-economic position or party. In their place were a series of more volatile clusters of beliefs and commitments centring around core values and ideologies. (Rose et al., 1990) Amongst these clusters of beliefs identified ten years ago were some which have grown and taken on a much greater significance in the intervening years: for instance, the 'Little England' cluster of 1990 has become the mainstay of a much more broadly based Anti-European stance. However, right in the centre of Rose's map of ideas, conceived along 'left/right' and 'traditional/modern' axes, was a core of diffuse 'green values' - everyone's good ideas, uncomplicated by political affiliations or lifestyle consequences. During the fuel dispute these ideas were squeezed because they had no real place in contemporary political programmes. They only came to reassert themselves when the consequences of neglecting them became unavoidable. When homes started flooding, green values ceased to be a series of vague aspirations about the future, they began to have immediate self-interested implications for the present.

However, it is another of the belief clusters identified by Rose and his colleagues that gives us a key to understanding the politics of the fuel protest. One of the more traditional value clusters identified in 1990, this one leaning slightly towards the left, was a set of ideas labelled 'muck and brass welfare' by Rose. In part, the label refers back to the 'gas and water socialism' attributed to the Fabian pioneers Sydney and Beatrice Webb. It concerns the notion of cheap but universal standardised services for working class clients. More recently the label has acquired rather more proprietorial overtones: 'our people' were supposed to consent; 'our politicians' were expected to deliver. Nowadays, 'consent' has come to seem more conditional, pragmatic and instrumental as politicians have found it harder to deliver. In this context, the volatile and very specific nature of the fuel protests, the methods of mobilisation and network-based organising, have led some commentators to draw parallels with the anti-capitalist demonstrations of Seattle and Prague, the recent By-Pass Protests, Reclaim the Streets or 'Stop the City' demonstrations of Summer 1999. More historically informed commentaries have tried to compare fuel protests with the 18th century 'bread riots',

triggered when the price of bread rose to a level that the poor could not - or would not - tolerate. In fact, however, such comparisons are invalid.

There are fundamental differences between the various protest activities, a difference in respect of the objectives of the protests themselves. As we have already noted, the fuel tax protest was a protest at the gates of the petrol refineries and at petrol-pumps - the sphere of distribution and consumption. To draw upon a distinction by Anthony Giddens (1981), it was a power struggle over 'allocation' (distributional justice, 'fair shares') By contrast, the struggles on the streets of Prague or the bread riots of 18th century England were, in part at least, struggles around 'authority' (questioning the very legitimacy of the decision-makers). Despite their more general rhetoric, the fuel protesters made clear their reluctance to fundamentally challenge governmental authority, rather they were looking for particular concessions, sectional advantages, preferential treatment - roughly translated as: 'money off fuel', or, tax cuts. Everyone could play this game, the principle of justice underpinning it is comparative and inherently competitive. We all want more for less, it is the clarion-call of post-Thatcher Britain. By contrast, the challenges of the anti-capitalist protesters in Prague or the environmental resistance movements are not about 'allocative' issues at all. They are animated by deeper principles, challenging the very authority of the decision-making which governs so much of contemporary life and culture. (Klein, 2000) Arguably, they also display rather less of the competitive individualism evident in our recent fuel protests.

Questions for discussion

- What longer term social and economic factors lay behind the petrol dispute?
- Why were the petrol blockades so effective, so quickly?
- What is the significance of the dispute as a conflict within the 'sphere of consumption'?
- What might the initial popularity of the protesters actions tell us about contemporary British culture? But then, why did the issue fade away so quickly?
- How would you compare - or contrast - the actions, aims and objectives, of the fuel protesters with those of the demonstrators at the World Bank economic summit in Prague in September this year?

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