



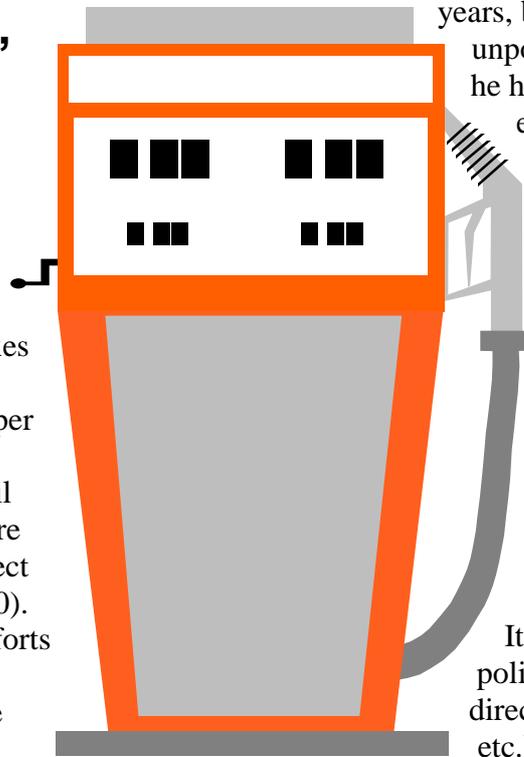
## The Peasants' Revolt – Year 2000

By Stephen Berry

**B**ritain has the highest fuel taxes in Europe. At over 80 pence per litre, the recent OPEC rises in the price of oil meant that UK motorists were faced by the very real prospect of a £4 gallon (roughly \$5.60). But, despite the very best efforts of the politicians, people in Britain are refusing to blame OPEC or the oil companies.

The majority of them take their holidays abroad and they know that the cost of petrol is lower in Greece and Spain (I make no mention of the US where it appears to us that the stuff is given away virtually free). No, UK citizens know that tax contributes more than a whopping 70% of the price of petrol and they know who is to blame.

In the interests of fairness I have to point out that both of the major political parties have contributed to this sad state of affairs. It was the Conservatives in 1993 who first introduced the so-called 'fuel escalator', the policy of raising duties on petrol and diesel by more than the rate of inflation. Presented as a way of preventing global warming, fuel taxes were annually increased by 5% above the rate of inflation. The election of a new government in 1997 changed little. Gordon Brown, the Labour Party's chancellor of the exchequer, continued with the fuel escalator for another two



years, before its increasing unpopularity meant that he had to get rid of it earlier this year. But, the damage had already been done. By this summer, the price of petrol had risen by 44 per cent since

Labour took office – from 59 to 85 pence per litre – and 34 per cent of that was tax.

It was of little use the politicians bleating that direct taxes (income tax etc.) were considerably

lower in the UK than in Continental Europe. This merely brought into clearer focus the absurd situation where indirect taxes on certain goods such as fuel, cigarettes and alcohol were so high that it could actually pay someone in England to travel all the way to France or Belgium to purchase these products.

The complacency of politicians is legendary. Even widespread protests in France this August against fuel taxes barely registered. They were snootily dismissed in the UK as Gallic high spirits, precisely the sort of thing one might expect from unruly Frenchies – 'we do things differently over here' was the typical response.

The news first broke on September 7<sup>th</sup> that tanker drivers and farmers were staging a protest outside a refinery in the north-west of England. Over the following weekend the demonstrations spread to all Britain's major refineries

and by Monday 11<sup>th</sup> September there was panic buying of fuel in London. By Tuesday evening 90% of filling stations in Britain had run out of petrol. All this happened with a speed which would have left the German generals of 1940 gasping with envy. And all this had happened with massive popular support and without the intervention of a single major labour union.

What was the government doing whilst this was going on? 'New Labour' is pursuing what is amusingly called 'an ethical foreign policy'. Apart from bombing the living daylight out of Serbs and Iraqis, this has meant taking sides in an incomprehensible civil war in the former British colony of Sierra Leone. The resultant capture by rebels of a number of British soldiers meant that while the fuel protests were building up, Prime Minister Blair was heavily involved in plans to rescue these soldiers from their West African hell-hole. Eventually when he stumbled into view at a press conference on Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> September, he promised to get things moving again within 24 hours. 24 hours later, nothing of any significance had occurred, and his intervention had had the effect of merely making him appear both impotent and ridiculous. On Thursday morning with Britain almost at a complete standstill, the tanker drivers and farmers called the protest off and gave the government 60 days to come up with some formula to bring fuel taxes down – or else face the music once more.

The results of the protest seem at this stage to be almost entirely positive. The Green Movement has been remarkably quiet during the dispute, and wisely so. The average tanker driver may not realise that only a very small proportion of total carbon dioxide emissions on this planet are due to human activity. He does grasp however, that high fuel taxes threaten his livelihood here and now and that their supposed beneficial effects on the weather 100 years from now are rather

speculative and of little consolation to an unemployed man. The importance of petrol for an advanced economy was made crystal clear to the dullest brain when food on the supermarket shelves started to run low. The Greens' vision of a pastoral nirvana must now appear as the most hopeless naivety to many people.

The present government has taken a most fearful hit. For almost three years, the Labour government has held a seemingly unassailable lead in the opinion polls, the longest political honeymoon in living memory. Blair has increasingly conducted himself with all the pomp of a Roman Emperor who is here to stay, the economy has been performing remarkably well and taxes have been increased with little protest. Now everything has changed – 'Never glad confident morning again!' During the dispute, Blair has seemed hopelessly out of touch and worse, incompetent. An opinion poll published on the 17<sup>th</sup> September gives the Conservatives their first opinion poll lead since 1992 and tax-cutting will definitely be an important issue in the run-up to the next election.

The dispute has had its ironic side too. One of the items high on the wish-list of the Trotskyite/Maoist style revolutionaries of yesteryear was a spontaneous revolution of the masses without leaders. Remarkably, this supremely anti-elitist achievement seems to have been accomplished by the tanker drivers, though without any fanfare from the left-wing who were still chattering about the unwholesome profits of the oil companies. More strangely still, whilst the dispute was going on the Trade Union Congress was holding its annual get-together, and the union barons found time to condemn the protesters – but all to no avail.

The conduct of the protesters was law-abiding and a model of good humour.

*The Libertarian Alliance is an independent, non-party group, with a shared desire to work for a free society.*

Fuel for the emergency services was allowed to pass without question and desperate attempts to shamelessly exploit this issue by the government fell completely flat. The tanker drivers and farmers are responsible working men worried that a ridiculously high tax would put them out of work, and they are in no way to be compared with the anti-capitalist riff-raff who violently wrecked property in London recently whilst demonstrating against 'Globalism'.

The reporting of this issue by the media has been instructive. The BBC, uniquely for a broadcasting organisation in the English-speaking world, is dependent for its revenue on a licence fee which the citizen with a television is legally compelled to pay. Predictably, it is desperate not to offend the government of the day and, for various other reasons, is particularly comfortable with New Labour and Mr Blair. Listening to the BBC one might have picked up the impression that that country was split down the middle on the fuel issue. But ITV, the main commercial broadcasting channel, was bold enough to conduct polls asking such questions as:

- Is fuel duty too high?
- Do you support the tanker drivers?
- Is Blair handling this crisis in a competent manner?

In all cases, more than 90% (Yes, more than 90%) of respondents gave verdicts opposed to what the Government would like to hear. **It was hard indeed to pick up any of this up from the BBC. Anyone who seriously cares about freedom must realise there is a major problem to address here.**

H. L. Mencken wrote:

*The average man, whatever his errors otherwise, at least sees clearly that government is something lying outside him and outside the generality of his fellow men*

*– that it is a separate, independent and often hostile power, only partly under his control and capable of doing him great harm.*

The average man in the UK has perceived clearly that the fuel taxes are doing him great harm and has made a dignified and powerful protest. Would that there were a strong and consistent anti-statist party in Britain which could provide the substantial analysis which would enable the average man's perception to flourish and grow. But I don't wish to end on a pessimistic note.

A quarter of a century ago in the UK, inflation was rising towards 20 per cent, unemployment was set to rocket and state sector workers were demanding that the government hand over ever more taxpayers' money to them. In the year 2000, inflation is the lowest in living memory, the unemployment rate is 3.6 per cent and falling, and there is the delightful prospect of workers periodically and vigorously demanding that their taxes be reduced.

*Welcome to the brave new millennium!*