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Poll Tax

# THE NON-PAYER

THE ANTI - POLL TAX CAMPAIGN

## PRELUDE

After decades of deterioration of working-class conditions, particularly in the latter half of the 70s, the Poll Tax was introduced as the culmination of all anti-working class laws and legislation. The viciousness and regressive nature of this tax caused such revulsion that inspired the biggest mass demonstration and civil disobedience this century.

Despite low morale resulting from the defeat of the miners, teachers, printers, dockers and other unions, but angered by an injustice which created untold hardship, and spurred on by millions of East Europeans fighting against oppression and harsh living conditions, the fight started in earnest in Scotland by community based organisations a year ahead of its implementation there.

## INTRODUCTION

The Poll Tax was put forward in the Tory Party's 1987 election manifesto amid strenuous claims to its fairness, and behind a smokescreen of misinformation; firstly calling it a 'Community Charge'; secondly relating it to provision of public services; and thirdly claiming to make local authorities 'more democratic and accountable' to the electorate. Making everyone over the age of 18 liable to pay tax, irrespective of their income, could leave no-one in doubt that this was indeed a 'head tax' similar to the first Poll Tax introduced in 1381.

## IMPLEMENTATION

In the euphoria of the 1987 Tory election victory it was decided that the implementation of the Poll Tax should be brought forward to April 1989 in Scotland and 1990 in England and Wales (leaving out Northern Ireland for the time being).

Despite the spending of enormous sums of money by local authorities, the compilation of Poll Tax registers, let alone its collection, brought chaos; many registration officers, and even Tory Councillors, resigned.

The government deemed it sufficient to rely on civil courts to obtain Liability Orders (in England and Wales) to arrest wages or Income Support; the use of private bailiffs; and finally, if all else failed, the threat of imprisonment in order to coerce those least able to pay the tax.

( continued overleaf )



cont ...

Upto December 1991 some 25,000 hours of court time were spent issuing more than 10,500,000 Liability Orders. A small percentage of this number (under 200,000) attended their court hearings and gained first hand experience of British justice.

Thanks to the efforts of non-paying activists, many millions learned how to resist councils, courts and bailiff threats. By December '92 only around 200 people had been jailed, for durations varying from 10 days to 3 months.

Despite all the intimidation and strenuous efforts of local authorities, and most effective use of the media to blame non-payers for all the country's shortcomings, there are still over 17 million people who have either paid very little or nothing at all, or have disappeared from the register altogether.

#### WHY WE MUST NEVER PAY

The Poll tax was introduced to further shift the share of taxation from the rich to the poor.

When the Poll Tax was introduced it was well known that 8-10 million could not pay it.

Even those with no income at all have been jailed for non-payment.

As the aim of the Poll Tax is to make these people hand over their money the only means of complete abolition is **NON-PAYMENT**.

(By abolition we mean :

- a) all debts to be written off
- b) no-one to be jailed for civil debt
- c) the replacement to be based on the ability to pay).

As councils become more desperate to collect, and the government tries to save itself from total defeat and political humiliation, no doubt they will resort to sending more people to jail.

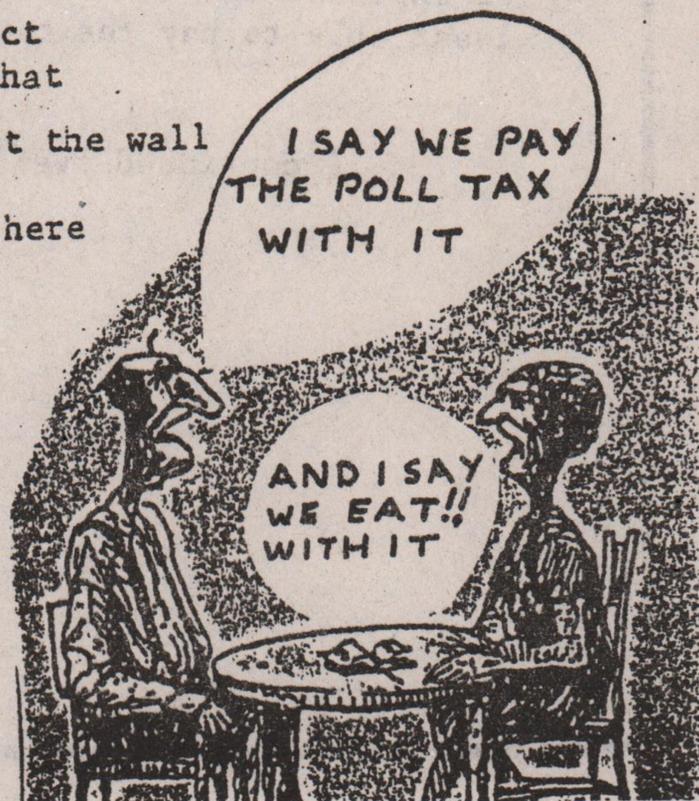
For millions living below the poverty line jail is the only option. This is precisely why we must all stand together and refuse to pay; to defeat this hated tax in its entirety - to hasten its complete abolition and hence reduce the number of innocent people jailed, and the agony of millions more.

\* \* \* \* \*

#### ODD ODE

P is for people who are in this fight  
O is for oppression and all things not right  
L is for Labour, who're not with us that's a fact  
L is for leafletting, and we've done a lot of that  
T is for Tories who try to pin activists against the wall  
A is for Amnesty, what we want for us all  
X is for X-Ray, I don't know what that's doing here  
Yet all I know is that this bloody Poll Tax  
Is now in it's third year.

Colin Brett  
April 1992





## STEPS TO VICTORY - A NON-PAYER'S GUIDE

" I've decided not to pay any (more) Poll tax. Now what ? "

1. Bills and reminders : These come through the post. Ignore them.

2. Liability Orders : You will be summonsed to court to be issued with a piece of paper telling you to pay up; which you also ignore.

In the first year thousands of people turned up to court, clogging the system. Now most people don't bother - thereby saving loss of wages, fares and shoe leather - as you get the same Liability Order whether you turn up or not.

3. Bailiffs : (Also called Debt Recovery Officers).

First you get a note through your door saying that if you don't pay within so many days they will come to take your goods.

This too you should ignore, as

- a) They don't always return, not having enough numbers to get to everyone
- b) They have no right of entry if you don't let them in.

If they do return and you feel threatened, get family, friends and neighbours round to give you support.

Just remember : Keep doors and windows locked, and don't open the door to anyone you don't know.

If you are seriously worried, call one of the numbers on the back page.

4. Wage Arrestment : You may be sent a form requesting details of your employment so that they can ask your employer to stop the Poll tax out of you wages.

Strictly speaking you can be fined for not returning this form. In practice thousands have ignored it and had no come-back.

If you do decide to return it you might like to correspond with the council over such matters as 'What do you mean by employer? Is it the name of my boss?', etc.

Discuss non-payment with your work mates. Raise it in your Union.

Many employers would rather pay a fine themselves than have a disgruntled workforce (so says a Small Businesses Association chairman).

As a last resort, if they begin arrestment, consider changing/leaving your job. A bit drastic? How safe is anybody's job anyway these days?

5. Deductions from benefit : Poll tax can't be stopped from Unemployment Benefit or pensions.

It can be stopped from Income Support. There's little you can do about this; but you lose nothing by appealing. If you already have deductions from I.S. (eg. for fuel, loans, etc) there is a maximum of 25% of I.S. that can be stopped in any week. So if your deductions come to a quarter of your benefit they can't stop Poll tax as well.

6. Prison : This is a last resort. You can only be summonsed to a committal hearing after the council have tried all the above unsuccessfully. So it takes a long time to get to this stage.

a) If you turn up for your committal hearing :

Magistrates are reluctant to send people to jail for non-payment.

They will ask about your financial situation. They will then order you to pay so much a week, with a suspended sentence of so many days should you default. If you fall into arrears they will call you back to court to ask why. They can then order a lesser amount, or impose the sentence.

If you refuse outright to pay or discuss your means you can be sent straight to jail.

b) If you don't turn up for your committal hearing :  
A warrant will be issued, ordering you to court so that they can proceed as above.

A lot of people have had such warrants issued and have ignored them; and are still 'at liberty' many months on. The police make only a token effort to follow them up (if at all) as they have better things to do than act as debt collectors for the council. In some areas they have refused to have anything to do with them at all.

The maximum sentence is 3 months. This is rarely given.

In the first 2 years of the Poll Tax some 200 people have been to jail for non-payment in England and Wales (there is no jail for non-payment in Scotland). Under the rates about 400 a year were jailed for failing to pay.

It's common sense that they can't jail 17 million. So stand firm.

Non-payment is a civil offence. You do not get a criminal record.

N.B. Once you have been to jail for non-payment the debt becomes 'uncollectable'. The council may record the amount as 'owed' on future bills, but this is a technicality. As jail is a 'last resort' they lose all rights to try to collect it. This is the law.

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### Dead But Not Yet Buried

The Poll Tax is dead I'm told  
Buried, forgotten and gone  
We can all pat ourselves on the back, I'm told  
WRONG WRONG WRONG

No more crowded court rooms I hear  
The councils are moving slow  
They are waiting for the local elections  
NO NO NO

Bailiff scum firms are quitting  
You can see it with your very own eyes  
Most councils have given up pursuing us  
LIES LIES LIES

No friends, it's not finished yet  
Not by a very long score  
In fact now's the time to turn up the valve  
Put the pressure on even more

There's still folks in prison  
There's still others to go  
There's still leafletting and campaigning  
There's still this to do, that to do and so

Make a vow to yourself tonight  
Before leaving this meeting in fact  
Do something positive this week  
my friends

ACT ACT ACT

Help spread the work load,  
it's rewarding,  
It's pay's very high you see  
For what you'll see for your efforts  
Is the accursed Poll tax in the bin  
of history.

Colin Brett  
April 1992

## LAW - WHAT LAW?

NON-PAYERS get accused of being law breakers; of inciting others to break the law.

Firstly : Non-payment of the Poll Tax is not a criminal offence. Even if you go to prison you do not get a criminal record. You are a Civil prisoner (and as such get 'special' privileges - eg. daily visits).

Secondly : Civil disobedience has a long and honourable tradition. If it wasn't for such actions women would still not have the vote.

Thirdly : What regard do the Poll Tax collectors have for the law ? For laws they made themselves?

In the first year of summonses for Liability Orders non-payers throughout the land were refused the right to a 'Mackenzie friend' to assist them in court. It was later proved in the High Court that there was indeed legal entitlement to such help.

Many non-payers argued in court that the computer evidence used to issue Liability Orders against them was inadmissible. They were told by Council solicitors, by Magistrates and by legally qualified Clerks to the Court that this was not so. Two years later the High Court has ruled that the non-payers were correct - i.e. some 10½ million Liability Orders had been issued on inadmissible evidence. Did the councils and courts apologise to these people? Did they withdraw the illegally issued Orders? Not at all. Parliament rushed a new bill through to make them legal.

Until 1992 it was the law that if there was no legal Liability Order issued, a debt became cancelled after 2 years. In January 1992, when they realised that the 2 years was nearly up for 1990 bills, and fearing that they couldn't get the above new law through in time, that law was changed overnight; giving the councils 6 years to collect the tax!



Saying no to the Poll Tax 1381

Fourthly : It is well known that bailiffs are unscrupulous thugs. They have little regard for the law. There are numerous incidents of bailiffs trying to take non-payers goods illegally. Yet all too often the police take the bailiff's side in such situations, and even actively help them in their illegal acts.

So, government, councils, courts, bailiffs and police all ignore and/or change the law as it suits them.

Non-Payers are not the law breakers.

We are exercising a basic human right to resist oppression and injustice through peaceful civil disobedience.

We uphold the moral law - defending the poor and weak.

Many heroes of legend and history have been dubbed criminals ( and imprisoned ) - from Robin Hood to the Tolpuddle Martyrs, from Jesus Christ to Ghandi and Mandela. We are not ashamed to be amongst these.

'That which is unjust is unlawful'. George Washington

# POLITICAL PRISONERS IN BRITAIN

Why 'Political' prisoners ?

Because Non-Payers are not imprisoned as a means of getting the money off them. On the contrary, by imprisoning Non-Payers the council loses all rights to pursue the debt. In fact it costs the council a great deal to take this step. (On top of which it costs over £300 per week to keep someone in jail). Nor do councils have to send anyone to prison by law. (This is the only country in Europe that imprisons for civil debt).

So jailing Non-Payers is purely intimidatory. It is meant to frighten us and keep us in our place - i.e. subservient to whatever laws might be imposed, however unjust.

The extent to which this is used as a threat can be clearly seen in the numbers of pensioners who have been jailed in England and Wales (there is no imprisonment for debt in Scotland) - men and women in their 60s, 70s, 80s and even 90s! Perhaps we are supposed to cower in panic, thinking if they can do this to these brave old fighters what will they do to the rest of us?

But such inhuman cynicism has backfired. It has made reasonable people all the more determined. If these, often frail and ill, pensioners can stand up for themselves and others, surely the more able-bodied of us can. Remember that each of us taking up a prison cell prevents another old person or single parent being there.

Inside jail we have found that almost all the other prisoners and warders are sympathetic. They see the stupidity of sending Non-Payers into already overcrowded jails; and know also that they are there either through poverty or as a matter of principle.

The Nottingham Defence Fund exists to support anyone jailed due to the Poll Tax. Advice, moral and, where necessary, financial support can be provided (eg. money for visits, Postal Orders to prisoners for toiletries, etc). Non-Payers can also be put in touch with those who have already been 'inside'.

We should also remember those jailed following the Trafalgar Square demonstration of 31.3.90; some still serving long sentences for Public Order offences - which most people now realise means that they defended themselves and others against brutal police attacks on an otherwise peaceful demonstration. Some cases are still waiting to be heard!

Similarly, sentences have just been passed on 4 people arising from a demonstration in Colchester prior to Trafalgar Square. Others are also still to be tried. Those just sentenced, and those who were found not guilty, have spent 3 months travelling daily to Norwich for the trial.

Both imprisoned Non-Payers and those serving longer sentences because of opposition to the Poll Tax need our support. One way is to write letters or send cards of encouragement. Money is also needed (as ever!) to supply them with weekly cash and help family and friends with visiting.

For information about prisoners, advice or donations, contact :

Nottingham Defence Fund  
Box NDF, 72 Radford Road, Nottingham  
or 'phone : 780557 or 608363



MEETINGS & CONTACTS

Meetings may be changed from time to time, so check with the contacts.

If your area is not mentioned here, contact any of the numbers for information or advice.

If you want to set up a group of your own, we'll be glad to help.

Group

Meetings

Contact

Broxtowe

Alternate Wednesdays  
7.30 p.m.  
The Star, Beeston

Clifton

Lenton

Radford

Rushcliffe

2nd Wednesday of month  
8.00p.m.  
Test Match pub  
West Bridgford

Nottingham Defence Fund - see details on previous page

