

UK: 30 year after the Poll Tax.

Sunday 5 April 2020, by [STONE Andrew](#) (Date first published: 31 March 2020).

The 30th anniversary of the Trafalgar Square riot is a good time to reflect on Simon Hannah's engaging account of the movement that scuppered Thatcher's poll tax, writes Andrew Stone

Simon Hannah, *Can't Pay, Won't Pay: The Fight to Stop the Poll Tax*

(London: Pluto Press, 2020). 192pp. £16.99

As communities once again break the shackles of atomisation and organise Mutual Aid networks in response to the Coronavirus, it's worth remembering the precedents in working class history. In an era where the 'common sense' is that collective action can never be effective, the anti-poll tax movement stands as a potent rejoinder. This was a movement which took on the flagship policy of a three-times elected Thatcher government, and not only led to the tax's removal but indirectly to that of the 'Iron Lady' too.

Hannah's excellent study locates the movement within a long history of popular resistance. Following [Paul Bagguley](#), he applies Marxist historian EP Thompson's concept of the '[moral economy](#)', which was originally devised to understand the plebeian justification for 18th century food riots, to the protestors' case that it was 'better to break the law than break the poor'. He traces how the movement discredited the individualist notion of a flat rate 'community charge', uniting those unable to pay with those unwilling to do so on principle.

He recounts how the policy was devised at the height of Tory triumphalism over the defeat of the Great Miners Strike of 1984-5; how it was hastily approved within 15 minutes of a Cabinet meeting; how the loss of Scottish seats in the 1987 election, blamed on a rates revaluation resented by the middle class, convinced Thatcher that the poll tax needed to go ahead; how in an act of hubris the party hardliners ditched careful plans to phase it in, instead opting for a 'big bang' which would explode in their faces.

The explosion was a massive campaign of non-payment and non-compliance, allied to local protests and concerted efforts to frustrate the prosecution of poll tax rebels. It began in Scotland, where it drove the steep decline of Tory support alongside a revived left-leaning Scottish nationalism. But the 'guinea pigs' were not going to be compliant test subjects, with communities protecting each other from sheriffs sent to 'poind' (seize) goods to the value of non-payers' debts. In England the courts became a bigger battleground, with non-payers supported to make their case with solidarity protests and lay legal advisors ([McKenzie's Friends](#)).

The image that the movement most often conjures up is the mass demonstration at Trafalgar Square, when truncheon-wielding police phalanxes found themselves retreating from a hail of placard sticks and other projectiles. For many this was sweet revenge for the police's violence during the miners' strike. Trafalgar Square alone did not defeat the tax - a protest, no matter how big or confrontational, probably wouldn't have done that - but combined with the chaos and expense caused by non-payment, and the electoral price paid by the Tories in a succession of disastrous by-

elections, enough Tories were convinced that Thatcher, and ultimately the tax, needed to be sacrificed.

Hannah provides a fair analysis of the competing strategies within the left. He rightly has no sympathy for the Kinnockite strategy of equal condemnation for the tax and its opponents. Kinnock's counsel that the tax would only be defeated if Labour won the election proved wrong on both counts. Likewise the great and the good of the TUC and labour councillors who offered only tepid and ineffective lip service instead of real opposition. And the Communist Party's *Marxism Today*, which in line with its belief that the time for traditional class conflict had finished, called for, instead of a 'totalitarian' slogan like 'can't pay, won't pay', a plurality of tactics that often resulted in little more than badge-wearing.

As Hannah points out, it was the movements' ability to be a movement of resistance, that actively frustrated the government, and not just one that protested about its policies, that was crucial to its success. The fact that so many people were materially damaged by the tax made this radicalism more likely, but the key to the movement's success was to link so many potential 'victims' through bonds of support and activism that they were prepared to risk fines and imprisonment.

Militant Labour, the forerunners to the Socialist Party, were at the heart of the Anti-Poll Tax Unions and the national federation (or 'Fed') that co-ordinated this activity, and Hannah is right to give them their due, whilst also recognising that they could be territorial and sectarian at times. He also recounts how the strain of building the movement pulled them further away from the Labour Party, then in one of its periodic bouts of witch-hunting the left, and ultimately to split. The contribution of other left groups is recognised, though no doubt some will find reasons to quibble. It's puzzling, for example, why the *Socialist Worker* placards on the Trafalgar Square protest are vaguely described as being made 'by one of the Trotskyist groups', when a cursory glance at footage would make it clear which one.

In the aftermath of Trafalgar Square led to Class War dubbing rioters as 'heroes', while leading members of Militant denounced them on TV. While the possibility of some being agent provocateurs was not paranoid fantasy, to join the chorus of denunciation was a divisive mistake which reflected the pull of reformist respectability. Fortunately it did not prove fatal to the movement, partly because the splits in the ruling class were also widening, with rebates and caps showing weakness and leading towards the eventual abandonment of the whole policy.

Hannah adds some useful discussion on why this movement didn't lead to a wider revival of class struggle, and why a compromised Labour party added a [fourth successive electoral defeat in 1992](#). Nonetheless the movement, which was a major working class victory, coming only a few years after the defeat of the miners' strike, remains a vital source of lessons and inspiration for socialists today. This book will help to supply ideological arms for all those determined to resist when the Johnson government comes calling for us to pay the price of the Coronavirus crisis.

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