

The great petrol panic

Can you still remember The Great Petrol Panic? I do very little driving myself nowadays, but I usually top up the tank of the family car at the pumps at a local supermarket on a Sunday morning. I went there as usual one Sunday just after the wimpish French government had given way to their brutish lorry drivers, with the radio news carrying the story that Welsh farmers had started picketing oil terminals. My petrol station seemed busier than normal, and, as my fellow motorists stood by the pumps, we said to each other, “I thought that the panic had only hit Wales and the North-West. There shouldn’t be any panic here,” watching as the petrol gushed out of our over-full tanks onto our shoes.

My neighbour, Peter, is a retired bank manager, a *Daily Telegraph* reader and a founding member of our Neighbourhood Watch. The following week, we were chatting over the garden fence about how our grass just kept growing, and about the growing petrol panic, and about how the squeezing of the last little drop of petrol into our tanks did not mean that we ourselves had panicked. I gave my usual speech about how the answer to the panic involved rounding up every Welsh farmer into a big field and turning a machine-gun on them. I choose never to quarrel with Peter. If he says, “I hate to mention it, but I think that a sucker from one of the trees on your side is invading my side,” I will always reply, “Oh terribly sorry. You’re right. I will do something about that right away.” This time, to my horror, he replied quietly to my speech about the Welsh farmers, “Well, I have a certain sympathy for them.”

I rushed inside to my wife, (who is Welsh), and told her of Peter’s reply. She thought my own solution racist, and admitted that she agreed with Peter. I spluttered, pointing out that, as I always filled up the petrol tank, she had never paid a penny of fuel duty in her life, and, besides, since farmers – all of them, irrespective of race – always claimed that they worked 24 hours a day 365 days a year, I asked how they can afford to spare the time to picket oil terminals, and, besides, farmers pay only 3.13p a litre for fuel duty on their red diesel. “It is not just farmers outside the terminals,” she replied quietly, “there are lorry owners and taxi-drivers as well.” “Lorry owners,” I explained patiently, “are all fat men who eat greasy breakfasts, and drive around squashing hedgehogs, and taxi-drivers also eat greasy breakfasts, as well as chattering away when I would rather read my newspaper.” “You sound just a little bit prejudiced,” she replied. “Someone has to be,” I insisted, “besides, I never saw any opinion-former on the picket lines. Not a single corporate

treasurer. Not one.”

“Maybe they were dressed up as lorry drivers,” she suggested. “Unlikely,” I snorted, “besides, corporate treasurers know about the rules of supply and demand.” “This has nothing to do with the rules of supply and demand,” she replied, “it is all to do with tax levels.” “The laws of supply and demand and tax levels,” I corrected myself, “and all corporate treasurers know that these things are acts of God, which mankind cannot argue with.”

We retired to our corners, and glowered at each other for several days. Less than a week later, there was another panic, with petrol stations besieged, shouting and queue-jumping, fist fights, and motorists filling goldfish bowls with petrol. This panic, it turned out, had started from a rumour begun by a DJ on a commercial radio station in South Wales. “Typical Welsh behaviour” I remarked. “You are being racist again,” she replied, “and, besides, fuel duty is too high.”

“Look,” I said firmly, “I smoke cigarettes, and I reckon – I can’t quote figures, but I am sure that I can find them on the internet – that the tax on cigarettes is greater than the duty on fuel. Tobacco Duty is iniquitous, truly inhuman, but you don’t see me picketing tobacco warehouses, threatening to bring down the government unless they listen to smokers. I don’t picket or support picketers, “I continued proudly, “because I am a corporate treasurer.” “But it is the right of every citizen,” she explained patiently, “to protest against high taxes.”

“No, it is not,” I argued. “The Americans thought that, and look at the mess they have made of their country without having Britain to levy their taxes. They even have trouble electing a President. Look at France. They complained about their taxes, and they guillotined their aristocrats, and in a few more years they were building barricades and killing each other, and in a few more years after that they gave way to their brutish lorry drivers, who can’t even speak English when they are interviewed on our TV. And take the Poll Tax. A very simple, straightforward measure, the very model of fairness, but a few scaffolding poles through the windscreens of police cars forced its withdrawal. That led straight to the picketing of oil terminals. Don’t argue with me, for corporate treasurers know best. About supply and demand. And taxes. And history. And about the Madness of Crowds.”

“There. There. Just calm down,” said my wife, soothing my brow. ■

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