

## Jimmy Hood and the fuel crisis

When this appears Britain may be once more in the throes of a direct action protest over fuel taxes. So I am writing about the debate on October 24 when the House of Commons considered the fuel protests of last September, which began at Stanlow refinery in Cheshire. It was held on an Opposition Day, so the Conservatives selected the topic.

In search of nuggets of truth, I have to pick among innumerable party-political points scored or missed in the usual House of Commons way. Several such nuggets were offered by Mr Jimmy Hood, Labour MP for Clydesdale since 1987. He includes in Who's Who the information that he was "Leader, Nottingham striking miners, 1984-1985", so when it comes to direct action and its effect on democracy he knows what he is talking about.

Mr Hood said: "I do not accept that a cut in the fuel tax levy would automatically reduce the price of fuel. What would there be to stop the oil companies making more profit? . . . Many small road haulage businesses in my constituency are in trouble, usually as a result of the cut-throat approach of a lot of the big road hauliers who run the industry through the Road Haulage Association [which] was faxing, e-mailing and telephoning its members in my constituency days before the protests. It sent people to the demonstrations and protests. To say that the event was spontaneous is just a bit rich, and I do not accept it . . . On the Wednesday of that week, the Prime Minister had another meeting with the oil companies and the police. Within hours of that meeting, the protest was being called off. It is in that context that I raise my point about the defence of democracy, and the need to ask how we, as a Parliament, can defend it. If what happened was a spontaneous act - a popular uprising which happened just like that, and was called off just like that, as it was - questions must be asked. What led to its being called off? . . . A Member of Parliament, the late Norman Buchan, told me when I arrived as a new Member, 'Jimmy, always suspect a conspiracy until proven different'".

What the ex-miner Jimmy Hood failed to mention, and we cannot blame him for that, was that the law which provides for the prevention and punishment of such criminal conspiracies is for some unexplained reason not being used by the prosecuting authorities, a point I shall return to.

Jimmy Hood was shortly followed by the Labour MP for Ellesmere Port and Neston, Andrew Miller: "I want to explain to the House what happened on the night of 7 September at Stanlow refinery in my constituency . . . Stanlow is a major hazard site to which unimpeded access for emergency vehicles 24 hours a day is vital . . . A few minutes after 10 o'clock on 7 September the refinery was blockaded, and the main oil terminal entrances were physically blocked. That is intolerable as it puts my constituents at physical risk . . . the shadow transport spokesman had prior notice of the incidents that were to take place in my constituency and put my constituents at risk. When reading the report of my speech, I hope that he will consider that next time he might have the good grace to tell me, so that I can inform the police and the relevant authorities because of the major safety issues involved. Intimidation has been mentioned, and there was intimidation. A total of 185 incidents have been collated across the country . . . In one incident a driver was boxed in with a white van at either end of his vehicle, and was prevented from proceeding. Is [Mr David Maclean MP] saying that that is not intimidation? Is he saying that the leader of the protest, whom I met at about 3 o'clock in the morning on 8 September, was not being intimidating? . . . The leader of the protest said 'Our

only objective is to stop all fuel getting out of the plant . . . If the riot police move on us tonight, what happened in France will seem like a picnic. I do not care if Stanlow blows up”.

I could have mentioned many party points made in the debate by the political leaders, such as the fact that it was the Tories who introduced the fuel escalator by which taxes have been increased by much more than the rise due to inflation. However I thought it best to concentrate on the above extracts. They reinforce the complaint I made in a detailed letter published on September 29 (page 1397 above). The gist was: why do the authorities not prosecute for criminal conspiracy?

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