

Transcript of Podcast 028 – When Protests Work

{Intro}

{Recording of Margaret Thatcher talking to the media outside 10 Downing Street for the last time after resigning as Prime Minister – 28 November 1990}

Margaret Thatcher: Ladies and Gentlemen. We're leaving Downing Street for the last time after eleven-and-a-half wonderful years, and we're very happy that we leave the United Kingdom in a very, very much better state than when we came here eleven and a half years ago.

{intro music – jaunty, bouncy}

{Intro standard announcement:

Hello, and thank you for downloading. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a weekly series looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Brit with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the 'why's behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}

{Music fades. Podcast begins}

Hello :)

I hope you all have had a good week, and that if you went out and protested, the guide in my last episode was useful to you. Keep at it – as you'll hear later, protesting isn't something that's pointless – rather, when done well, it can cause considerable change. And regardless of what you might see on the news, it doesn't even have to ever descend into violence.

I'm conscious that in my last couple of episodes I haven't talked much about what I've been up to, or how I am, but sometimes I think the world around us demands something more important than trivialities about my failure to find a job or the number of words I've written on my upcoming stories. That said, next week I'll talk more about one particular story I've written for an anthology – we're closing in on publication date and it's very exciting.

But for this week, let's continue talking about protests. Now, I'm British. And while at the moment there are Black Lives Matter protests happening here in the UK, the majority of the action is taking place in the USA, and understandably so. Some people might take this as proof that backs up their belief that the British are a reserved bunch who wouldn't take to the streets even if a literal Nazi rocked up as Prime Minister (there's an argument to suggest that much of Middle England would actually quite like that scenario, as long as it didn't affect them personally, or house prices; that someone like Nadine Dorries can be elected with a large majority does nothing but back this theory up). I am, of course, not saying Nadine Dorries is a Nazi

And it's true that we don't have the ... history of bloody and violent revolution (notably in 1848 when monarchs were being cast aside across Europe, we had the Chartist movement who managed to gather somewhere around 100,000 people peacefully into muddy field in London and presented a highly dubious petition to parliament that was laden with so many inaccuracies as to be laughed out of the Commons). In more recent times, one only has to look to France in 1968 – still a cultural watershed in that country – where seven weeks of protest and strikes took the country to the brink of actual civil war and revolution, and of course the events two decades later in the communist states of Central and Eastern Europe, where mass street protests did cause the downfall of governments and changes in entire political systems (although only in Romania was the revolution marked by a, shall we say, more traditional method of government change).

However, that's not to say the British can't revolt when the need arises. So, today on storytime with the Barefoot Backpacker, here are some examples when we took to the streets to instigate pseudo-revolutionary change, or fight strongly enough for a cause that the mood and policy of the country veered.

{alternative section separation jingle}

{Great Reform Act - 1832}

First, let's go back a couple of hundred years, to a time when even the country name was different, and when politics was a very different beast indeed.

It's 1830. Year of the first fee-paying, entirely mechanical, inter-city, passenger railway in the world (between Liverpool and Manchester), also the year of the publishing of the Book of Mormon, and one of several years in the century in which there were revolutions across Europe – the most notable being in Belgium which declared independence almost by accident from Netherlands, and of course in France where Louis XIX holds one of those 'technical' records as one of the shortest-ever reigning Kings (20 minutes was the time between his father's abdication and his own, most of which seems to have been spent, in stereotypical French style, contemplating the infinite.). It's interesting to note that we're taught in schools that the French monarchy was overthrown in the French Revolution of 1789. And it's true, it was; just they did it twice more afterwards (thrice, depending how you view Napoleon III). All three kings in question (Louis XIX, Louis-Philippe, and Napoleon III) ended up in exile in the UK, along with other ex-luminaries from the 1848 revolutions across Europe; I don't know what to make of that, except that if you add in Lenin, de Gaulle, and Pinochet, we seem to be good at housing people other countries' governments or societies don't really like.

Anyway.

The British political system was ... a bit old-fashioned; there were two Houses of Parliament – The Lords (the landowners) and the Commons (MPs); the Lords traditionally had most of the power but things were swinging firmly towards the Commons. There were largely two parties – the traditional and strictly religious Tory Party, and the slightly more flexible Whig Party. There were 658 MPs elected from across the whole country (including, at that point, what is now Ireland), and there were two different types of constituency they could be elected for: county seats, and borough seats (interestingly this distinction still exists in the UK, though the major difference now seems only to be in the size of election budget the candidate is allowed to use). County seats were simple; the country was divided into counties, and each county usually elected two MPs. Think of them as huge constituencies. There was a property qualification; only people who owned a certain amount of property (valued at two pound a year, set in 1430 and never adjusted, because I dunno, when you're that rich you don't care about economic theory, maybe) could vote or stand as a candidate; the electorate in county seats grew over time because of inflation and stood around 190,000. The total electorate in 1831 was around 516,000 Out of a total population of 24 million.

Borough seats were much more complicated. Boroughs were generally old market towns, having been given a borough 'charter' by the monarch in times past, and there were several different types, each with different voting regulations – just because someone was qualified to vote in Northampton didn't mean someone with exactly the same income and demographic was allowed to vote in Cambridge. Again, very often these seats elected two MPs. In addition their application had never really changed from the 1600s – this meant that on the one hand you had places like Gatton in Surrey which, due to their restrictive tax-based franchise, usually less than ten out of their population of 135 had the right to vote – sometimes this dropped to a mere two, meaning that as the borough elected two MPs, effectively each elector voted in one MP, whilst on the other hand entire new towns, mainly in the midlands and the north, had no representation outside the county boroughs; Sheffield, Leeds, and Manchester being the best examples of this – the latter's population in 1831 stood at around 250,000, whilst Glasgow had virtually no representation at all since none of its citizens even qualified for the county seat property qualification.

The most notorious example is the famous constituency of Old Sarum in Wiltshire – a borough seat that elected two MPs in 1830, and it had once been notable, being the original home of what became Salisbury Cathedral. The only slight snag being that the village had been entirely moved and mostly destroyed. In 1322.

You may well ask: but if nobody lived there, how could it elect MPs? The answer lies in the weirdness of voter qualification; you had to own land there. This led to many constituencies across the country effectively being 'controlled' by the local lord, who would sell off parcels of enough land to people he trusted, who then became 'voters' in that constituency, and then in return vote for the candidates the landlord suggested. Since

the qualification was land ownership rather than residency, this also meant people could vote twice in different locations (and frequently did – elections took place over weeks rather than hours, so it was easy to travel between places).

In addition, voting was not secret. Votes were cast generally by a show of hands, or by marking your ballot paper in full view of everyone – including, importantly, the local Lord or one of his lackeys.

This all led to several factors that fundamentally undermined democracy; firstly that many elections were uncontested – Old Sarum, for instance hadn't had a contested election since 1751, and even that one only because the landowner had an argument with the local Lord about his candidate's viability. Secondly, even in potentially contested elections, it would be generally known who was going to win – there was no 'secret' to the opinions and connections of the local landowner, especially given the public nature of the vote.

In some places however, the opposite problem occurred; with more voters under less control, it was harder to coerce people into voting your way, so rather than the stick, the carrot was more frequently used. People 'sold' their land in prestigious boroughs for hundreds of pounds, even if it was only worth just above the eligibility threshold, because a vote in parliament was priceless. In other places, especially in the counties and the larger borough seats, voters were regularly bribed with financial or material reward – in Aylesbury in 1761 for instance the candidate won simply by paying the voters, whilst in other places voters were bribed with beer. I mean, it might encourage a larger turnout. Some pubs today in the UK serve as polling stations, but that's not quite the same thing.

Note too that travelling to vote was common; in the county seats, voting took place in the county town rather than in local polling stations, so even the act of voting itself was a long and expensive task, which voters expected to be paid back for by their candidate of choice.

The democratic system therefore needed a bit of reforming. And by 'a bit', what I actually mean is, 'turn into a democratic system'. Unsurprisingly, the concept of reform wasn't well-supported by parliament – requests to even debate reform were rejected out of hand. Demand for reform in the country was growing, not least amongst the new northern middle-classes who felt a bit left out of the system, but it wasn't until a most unlikely alliance between them and some very hard-right Tories who were scared of Catholics that any meaningful attempt was made.

See, until 1829, Catholics weren't allowed to become MPs, because, I mean we'd fought a couple of civil wars over this very subject in the previous couple of hundred years, but having annexed Ireland in 1801, there was now a substantial Catholic minority in the country, and the fear of a revolution from that quarter was deemed to be more pressing than anything else, especially after a prominent Catholic was elected in a by-election in 1828, forcing the issue. But, by allowing Catholics to become MPs, the fear amongst the hard right was that they would come to dominate parliament unless they could find a way to increase the number of traditional Anglican MPs in return. And the only way to do this, they felt, would be to tap into the largely religious industrialised middle-classes.

Not all the Tory Party agreed, especially in the Lords; despite winning the general election of 1830, the Tory PM, a chap by the name of Arthur Wellesley, First Duke of Wellington – yes, that one – refused to countenance any kind of reform. The party turned on him and two weeks later he was ousted – hard-line Tories preferring the Whig leader Charles Grey, the Second Earl Grey – yes, that one too – to push through reform. While that first reform act passed the Commons, the Lords rejected it. Grey wanted to prove a point, so called a snap general election.

This was a success; the Whigs walked the 1831 election and pretty much the only Tories left as MPs were those who'd been bought there. Grey brought forward a second Reform Act that skipped through the commons quicker and easier than a barefoot elf through the forest, and the feeling was the Lords, seeing just how much support there was in the country for reform, would abstain rather than voting against, and allow the bill to grudgingly pass. Many of them did, but the bill was blocked in part by the 'Lords Spiritual' – the Anglican Bishops who, as the country was legally religious, were entitled to a voice and a vote in Parliament.

This, shall we say, did not go down well in the country. The bill was defeated on 8 October, by the evening of

the following day, Nottingham and Derby were both in the grip of riots, whilst huge protests took place in Bristol at the end of the month (the most notable person in Bristolian political life, Charles Wetherall, was a noted anti-reformist and MP for a Rotten Borough in Yorkshire), culminating in around 200 deaths and £300,000 of damage, which at the time was an immense amount of money. The riots in Bristol were also particularly notable as they took place amid a backdrop of council ineptitude and disorganisation, and reluctance on the part of the military to openly get involved – they feared a repeat of a massacre on the scale of that at Peterloo Square in Manchester in 1819 that this time might spark a full-scale revolution.

Now, you'd think that the public's reaction to the failing of the Reform Bill would encourage parliament to pass it on its third attempt. And you'd be ... wrong. Although the Third Reform Bill passed the Commons with an even larger majority, the Lords delayed it, they argued every little pedantic point over it, and generally made its passage as difficult as possible. What happened next is a little politically nerdy to explain, but in short demonstrates a fair amount of brinkmanship.

Earl Grey figured the best way of resolving the issue in the Lords was to create a lot of new, pro-reformist, Lords to force the bill through. Because this was the 1800s and flooding parliament with a bunch of your supporters was a perfectly normal thing to do.

The only person who could create new lordships was the King.

The King did not want reform, and refused.

On 9 May 1832, Earl Grey, despite a huge majority in the Commons, resigned on principle.

The King invited the leader of the Tories, the Duke of Wellington, to form a government. Bear in mind the Tory Party was in quite the minority.

Now, within podcast memory we've had the situation of a Tory government in the UK having a huge minority and still managing to pass legislation through. One of the annoying abilities of right-wing governments is how, despite everything, they manage to survive whatever parliament throws at them. And I'm in no way comparing Boris Johnson to the Duke of Wellington; Johnson might like that comparison but everyone else who knows even remotely a little about both will raise an eyebrow at any attempt to compare.

In this case, however, the Duke, and I really don't believe I'm about to say this, especially given I'm genuinely recording this on the anniversary of the battle, met his Waterloo. I'm sorry, I'm not a comedian, you don't listen to this podcast for the jokes.

So, the Duke of Wellington tried to form an effective government for five days, but by 15th May he'd given up. The King had no option but to reappoint Earl Grey to the post of Prime Minister and acquiesce to his demands. Beaten, the Duke persuaded enough Lords to abstain from the next passage of the Reform Act, and a month later it became law – the UK had taken a first huge step to becoming the modern democracy that it is today, and the rotten boroughs became history.

The tipping point was the state of the country. Boris Johnson may have run a government with at one point a minority of 43, but there was never any actual danger of his being overthrown in a popular revolution. And despite what I said at the start of this tale, those five days when the Duke of Wellington was trying to form a government were very different to the modern situation of people writing passive-aggressive Tweets and commenting on articles in The Guardian. Rather, the "Days of May" as they were later known, were a very different beast.

It's not even that very much happened in those five days, but after all the rioting in the provincial cities earlier on in the process, it was more a fear. In Birmingham, a pro-reform group, the Birmingham Political Union, had been pushing for change for a number of years, and they reacted to Wellington's appointment with disdain; some 200,000 people turned up for a peaceful protest but the sheer numbers worried the establishment. In London, protestors marched with banners saying 'Stop the Duke, Go For Gold'; not a reference to a late 80s TV quiz show but rather an attempt to disrupt the economy by withdrawing gold savings from the banks preventing the government from obtaining income – around £1.5 million worth of gold was withdrawn in that week alone, partly as a result of direct action, and partly because some landowners feared a revolution was imminent and felt they needed to protect themselves. You know, like people do with toilet paper. Though thinking about it, I guess gold is washable and recyclable.

The other notable thing was that the protests were organised, structured, and persistent. This wasn't a time for

riots, rather this was a time for repeated demands by a large number of peaceful protestors. It's believed some 200 protests were held around the country, and 300 separate petitions for reform given to parliament in the "Days Of May". In the face of such agitation, allowing the reform act to pass was preferable to the alternative.

As a side note, it must be said the Reform Act of 1832 wasn't actually that impressive; it cleared the shit but it would take five further acts over the course of the next 120 plus years to obtain a Universal suffrage and a standard level of representation – for example Universities continued to elect MPs in Great Britain until 1950 and in Northern Ireland until 1969, meaning people could still vote twice in an election within living memory. Also, by standardising the voting qualifications nationwide, some people in the more eccentric borough seats actually lost the ability to vote (including, theoretically, women, since it was never formally established that women couldn't vote until 1832), but overall the electorate increased by around 60%, and many of the weird foibles of the election were abolished, redistributing seats, introducing voter registration, allowing multiple polling stations, and reducing the duration of elections from weeks to two days. One thing that wasn't implemented was the idea of a secret ballot – this took until 1872 to become law. What the 1832 Act did do though was prove that reform was possible – it was a first step to change centuries of malpractice, and it was achieved in part through the power of the people in standing up and demanding change.

{alternative section separation jingle}
{Battle of Cable Street - 1936}

Let's go forward a hundred years to a protest that's of a slightly different type, and unlike most protests in history took place on a specific day rather than over the course of weeks or months, but it's one that's definitely relevant to the current world circumstances. I refer to what was dubbed 'The Battle of Cable Street', that took place on 4 October 1936 in the Shadwell/Whitechapel/Wapping area of London.

Now, as you'll appreciate, this was quite an angsty time. The Spanish Civil War had just kicked off about two and a half months earlier – pitching the Nationalists (pseudo-facists, the military, and the church) against Republicans (the socialist government, Spanish regionalists, and some modicum of anarchists), Fascist Italy had just conquered Ethiopia, Nazi Germany was openly breaking the terms of the Treaty of Versailles by rearming themselves and re-occupying the Rhineland (that the French didn't react militarily seems to have been a combination of lack of finance for a war coupled with vastly over-estimating by possibly a factor of 10 just how many German troops moved in, but it gave Germany much more confidence in their own military position), while in New Zealand the last known Thylacine died, thus bringing to extinction this iconic species.

This rise in the far right was also being mirrored here in the UK, albeit with much less success (perhaps surprisingly, given how history might well view the last couple of hundred years of, specifically English, culture and society, but still). There were a number of right-wing parties, pressure groups, and the like active in the period, but the largest and most famous was the British Union of Fascists, led by Oswald Mosley, a former politician but possibly now more noted for being the father of Max Mosley, the former president of the FIA, which amongst other things is Formula 1 motor racing's governing body.

Oswald Mosley could be described as 'opportunist'. A brilliant orator and economic thinker, and at one point touted as being a potential leader of the Labour Party, he started out as a Conservative MP in 1918 before switching sides over a difference of opinion around Irish policy. However despite being made a Minister Without Portfolio in the Labour government of 1929, he quickly fell out with his peers again; his being felt he wasn't being listened to. He lost his seat in the 1931 election, and set up a new party, helpfully titled The New Party, before visiting Italy and deciding that in fact what he really wanted to be was Mussolini's boiled beef boy; the NUF formed in 1932.

It had some early successes, having a few local councillors elected (and two members of the party at this point later became Conservative MPs), and gaining the brief support of that balwart of liberal journalism, the Daily Mail (this is where the famous headline of 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts' came from, though in a surprising defence of the paper, this seems to have been borne more out of a mutual hatred of communism than than actual support for Mosley – they dropped him before the 1935 election. Not much of a defence, mind, because a) they still saw Adolf Hitler as a man worth admiring, and b) this is the Daily Mail so fuck

them anyway). However as the party fell more towards traditional anti-semitism rather than cutting-edge economic policy, their support waned amongst the middle-classes and became more of a training ground for what you might call foot-soliders. Not long after the party's formation, Mosley created a troupe of what some might call 'stewards' and others might call 'thugs' – these were the 'Fascist Defence Force' (FDF) and provided security for BUF events, served as Mosley's bodyguards, because evidently he felt his policies required some – can't imagine why – and were used for violent marches. They wore a uniform of black shirts and black trousers, presumably meant to mimic similar uniforms in Italy and Germany, and were involved in small riots and affrays in places as far apart as Stockton-on-Tees and Worthing.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, one area of strong support for the BUF was the less-affluent working-class areas of inner-city East London, places like Bethnal Green and Shoreditch. These were also areas which, even then, had a relatively large proportion of immigrants and Jews, both of which were anathema to the BUF. In order to boost his popularity, and to celebrate the fourth anniversary of the founding of the party, Mosley arranged for his party and, and his associated FDF, to march through the streets of the area and give speeches to their supporters, to rouse them but also remind them their economic distress was because of the Jews, like those whose streets they were due to march through.

Even in the days before the march was due to take place, tensions were getting high. Local residents had petitioned the Home Secretary to prevent the march from taking place; he refused, and authorised the use of several thousand policemen to clear the streets and allow the march to take place. Some of the policemen were mounted on horseback; indeed it's believed the vast majority of the entire Metropolitan Police mounted regiment were present. Does any of this sound vaguely familiar?

In response, the local East End population mobilised. Although the majority of the streets the march was due to pass through were Jewish, their numbers were bolstered by members of other local communities also affected by Mosley's rhetoric, particularly the Irish, with other support from communists and other socialist groups specifically brought in from elsewhere in London. They erected barricades (including, it's believed, a tram or a lorry, witness statements vary, that was deliberately crashed in such a way to block one of the streets), armed themselves with sticks, rocks, broken pieces of furniture, pretty much anything they could lay their hands on, and physically blocked not just Cable Street, but many of the surrounding side roads. Witnesses put an estimate on the number of defenders of Cable Street at upwards of 200,000, all shouting slogans like "no parasan" ('They Shall Not Pass'), taken directly from the Spanish Civil War.

In the event, the march never really took place. Rather, when faced with such a hostile onslaught, he wisely pulled away and his troupe wandered west instead, through London City Centre and towards Hyde Park. But that doesn't tell the story of the battle itself, which was largely one between the local population on the barricades and, not the fascists, but rather with the police.

See, as mentioned, the police were there to ensure the march could take place without trouble. Much of the violence, the destruction, that the battles wrought was done when the police attempted to remove the barricades from the streets. There was fighting from both sides – defenders threw stones and full chamber pots at the police (which was a bit shitty of them), who retaliated with baton charges and riding into the crowds to try to scatter them. The skirmish only lasted a couple of hours before the Fascists withdrew, taking the police with them. In total, around 170 people were injured across all sides, and it's believed around 150 defenders were arrested.

The effect of the battle was quite marked. Within three months of the battle, the government (through the Public Order Act 1936, specifically as a result of the battle of Cable Street) banned political organisations from not only having uniforms but also from having their own police-or-military style groupings (so no longer could parties use 'blackshirt' type security). It also forced political organisations to ask police permission before they could march – making a repeat of such an incident much less likely. Although in the short-term the now de-militarised BUF became a little more respectable and saw an increase in support amongst the middle-classes once again, it never reached the heights it saw in the mid-30s, and within three years, membership down to 20,000, it had been banned, and Mosley himself imprisoned as a war precaution. Although he dabbled in politics after the war, he was pretty much a spent force and ended up bugging off to Paris to write.

Interestingly, as a footnote, this Act of Parliament was invoked as recently as 2016, when two of the leaders of Britain First – a noted, er, fascist organisation - were arrested after a march in Luton for wearing branded green Britain First sweatshirts. Same shit different decade.

{alternative section separation jingle}
{Poll Tax Riots - 1990}

My final tale is something that happened much more recently; within my lifetime even, and while at the age of 14 I was fully aware of the 'what', I was much less aware of the 'why' – though this is tempered by my somewhat mollicoddled upbringing. Seeing a protest that indirectly leads to the downfall of a political leader is something I tended to associate in foreign countries (and indeed only a few months earlier, this had been a common theme across Central and Eastern Europe), but in a sense that's exactly what happened here in the UK.

The year is 1990. There's change across the continent as totalitarian regimes fell like trees under the onslaught of Brazilian corporations, Generation X were lost in a fog of illicit substances and rave music, and England's men's football team had the first of two reminders in the decade that the phrase it ain't over till the fat lady sings refers to German opera.

The UK was run by a Conservative government, centre-right with, at the time, a fetish for privatisation and individualism rather than community spirit. The Prime Minister was, of course, Margaret Thatcher, the UK's first female PM although as an aside she didn't appear to do much for Women's rights or advancement – in her entire time in office she only appointed one other woman to a cabinet-level post (Baroness Young, who seems to have viewed the LGBT community in much the same way as the average South African PM viewed the Black community), and only promoted a handful of other women into minor government positions. Anyway, Thatcher had, by now, been PM for nearly eleven years, running a government with a pretty healthy majority in parliament, and pretty much all the policies they'd gone into the decade promising had been fulfilled. Despite being electorally popular, there was a large subset of the population who despised her and everything she she stood for – she was quite a divisive figure (arguably the most divisive PM in the post-war era).

One of the groups of people who didn't like her were the Labour-run local councils that controlled many of the larger cities and industrialised urban areas. Local councils were, and are, responsible for local taxation that funds local council services like refuse collection, transport services, libraries etc, but the taxation itself is mandated and controlled by central government. The existing system of taxation based on the rateable (rentable, effectively) value of property had been in place since *at least* 1601, but the Conservative government thought it was old-fashioned and not fit for purpose – their plan was to introduce a flat rate tax, based on people not property, and force local councils to set and collect it themselves.

This was a huge change, as it meant more people would be liable to pay this tax than previously; whereas before it was house-driven, so the bigger your house the more the household paid, now it was people-driven, so the more people you had living at the house the more you paid, regardless of the value of the house. This meant of course that small families in larger houses (typical Conservative voters) paid less, whilst larger families in smaller houses (often in Labour areas) paid more overall. The Community Charge, as it was officially known, was implemented in Scotland first (as a trial run) in 1989, and England/Wales a year later.

What followed was one of the biggest grassroots campaigns of my lifetime, encompassing both civil disobedience and active protest. The slogan "Can't Pay Won't Pay" became mainstream; a series of pressure groups and community unions were formed to challenge the tax and encouraged mass non-payment and obfuscation, making it as difficult as possible to be arrested, never mind brought to the courts and convicted. Once the tax was implemented, local councils found it hard to collect because so many people refused to pay; in some areas it's suggested upwards of 30% of people liable were avoiding paying in way or another. Indeed, one Labour MP (Terry Fields) was jailed for two months for refusing to pay; that said he was on the very left-wing of the party and was expelled from it before the next election for being too far away from Labour policy [there's a whole story to be told of the 'Militant Tendency' group in the 1980s, but that's a bit too political even for this podcaster]. Some councils even stopped chasing people up for it because the costs of policing and managing it were becoming too high.

The tax itself became known disparagingly as 'The Poll Tax' (literally 'head tax'); parallels were made between it and a previous attempt to implement a similar tax (which was called a Poll Tax) in 1381, which famously led to a huge national uprising. Although suppressed, it made subsequent governments avoid this sort of thing like the proverbial plague, for pretty much this reason.

But this is a podcast about active protest, so I probably ought to talk about that. In the run up to implementation in England & Wales, a number of protests took place across the country to object to the new tax, but the largest of them occurred in London on 31 March 1990, supported by pretty much all the leading anti-Poll-Tax groups.

An estimated 200,000 people from all over the country took part in the protest which was originally scheduled for Trafalgar Square in the heart of London. Unfortunately the Square has an estimated capacity of less than a third of that, at around 60,000 – the organisers didn't quite anticipate when arranging it with the police just how many people were likely to turn up, and by the time numbers were realised, it was too late to change the planned routing. The protest thus filled up not just the Square itself, but also a number of the surrounding streets, including Whitehall – the heart of the British political centre, and the police moved around to ensure the protesters stayed in the one place and didn't end up occupying more of London than strictly necessary.

There were a number of problems with this: firstly it meant that a large group of slightly annoyed people were effectively stuck in position, without being free to march or even move very much. Secondly, many of the police themselves were decked out in riot gear, in anticipation of trouble, despite the protest being quite peaceful. Finally, there was building work going on in Trafalgar Square, which meant construction equipment, tools, and raw materials were ... shall we say, available.

There was a kind of stand-off for a couple of hours, with chanting and demonstrations of contempt for the government, while the police tried to edge protesters towards the Square. No-one's quite sure what happened next, but evidently something spooked the police, who then moved more forcefully into the crowd with horses and riot vans. The protestors responded by accessing the building equipment and either defended themselves from, or aggressively attacked, the police, depending on which side of the story you believe.

Bricks were thrown, fires were lit, batons were charged, and fights broke out; it all became quite messy and angry. When the police channelled the protestors down particular roads, the protests turned to riots and many of the shops were broken into. Violence and looting continued into the night, long after the bulk of protestors had made their way home. In total over 300 people were arrested, and just over 100 injured across all sides – police, protestors, and members of the public who'd had the misfortune to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Now, although the violence and rioting was condemned by almost all sides afterwards, two things resulted from this mass demonstration. The first was, in the legal proceedings that took place afterwards, much of the blame for the confrontation was placed at the feet of the police (and the lack of support, funding, and equipment the police had had), suggesting that their reaction was over-bearing and needless – most of those arrested were acquitted. The second was the amount of publicity the riot achieved in the media, and, when put alongside the civil disobedience and non-payment that occurred once the tax was implemented, gave a very strong impression to even the ruling Conservative Party, that the tax was ... probably not a good idea. This was confirmed with opinion polls later in the year that showed Labour with a huge lead, and that nearly 80% of people surveyed said they disagreed with the tax.

The problem for them was, this was a new and flagship policy, and casting it aside would be a severe embarrassment to the government, almost an admission of failure in fact. Ultimately, they decided that the best thing to do would be for the leader to take ultimate responsibility for it – it was her policy after all. Margaret Thatcher was an unwilling player in all of this, of course, but resignations from the cabinet followed by a leadership challenge in the autumn of the same year forced her hand, and she resigned.

John Major took over as Prime Minister, and literally his first policy act in the role was to announce the abolition of the Community Charge, to be replaced by what was called the "Council Tax". Which, although

with a slight reflection of household size, was a tax based on the estimated value of the property. Just like the rates had been.

Here, then, mass protest and civil disobedience were the primary cause of not just a reversal of government policy but also the resignation of a popular (or at least populist) leader who had previously been deemed pretty much untouchable.

{standard section separation jingle}

Well that just about wraps this episode up. Who knows what next time will bring – though I probably ought to talk about travel a bit again; after all this is nominally a travel podcast. Ha. Until then, keep pulling down the statues, and if you're feeling off colour, keep on getting better.

{Outro theme tune, same as intro, just a different bit of it}

{Outro voiceover:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice. I'm really bad at that sort of thing myself, so I'll understand perfectly if you don't.

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Until next week, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}