

# The Flagship Goes Down

By HENRY LAW (Brighton, England)

England has at last woken up to the new Poll Tax, officially known as the "Community Charge," which came into force on 1st April. During March, town councils all over the country were disrupted by demonstrations when they met to fix the tax. The government blamed extreme left-wing troublemakers, which was certainly the case in parts of inner London, but surely not in well-heeled towns like Windsor and Maidenhead? Doubtless, more disturbances can be expected when the time comes to collect the money.

The poll tax was introduced to remedy a long-standing injustice. As is well known, Britain is absolutely full of poverty-stricken widows living in vast mansions in the most expensive parts of town. The injustice caused to them because of the local property tax had become a matter of the most urgent public concern - completely overshadowing issues such as homelessness, unemployment, inner city decay, road congestion, the state of the National Health Service, drugs, Aids, etc. Under the old local property tax, a single widow living on a pension had to pay the same as the family next door where every one was working. (Actually, under the old property tax, pensioners were allowed fairly generous rebates, but to point this out spoilt the case for the poll tax.)

The principle behind the poll tax is that since every one makes the same use of council services, every one should pay the same. Thus, with the exception of monks, nuns, prisoners and the insane, each adult over the age of 18 will be liable for the poll tax. There are rebates for those on low incomes, but every one will have to pay at least 20% of the charge.

The poll tax was introduced in Scotland a year ago, but there are no plans to have it in Northern Ireland. No one has said as much, but perhaps certain difficulties were expected in collecting the poll tax from residents in the Falls Road.

To make this system work, a vast new registration system has had to be set up so that council know where every one lives. When any one moves, they must now report their change of address to both sets of registration officers, where they have come from and where they are going to. It does not take much imagination to realise that it has been very expensive just to set up the machinery to administer the new tax.

The logistics of actually gathering in the cash are something else again. At least one private security firm is offering a collection service, using a sort of armoured mobile bank which would be driven round council estates. Mobile banks might be a solution if people decide to pay, but as councils have been finding out in Scotland, many citizens have ignored their poll tax demands. Now court warrants are pouring off the printing presses, and those who still refuse to pay will receive a visit from the bailiffs, and their goods seized and sold off - an exercise which in many instances will scarcely be worth the effort. Councils will be doing well if the cost of collecting the poll tax turns out to be less than 10% of the yield.

The poll tax is intended to cover about one-quarter of local councils' budgets. The rest is being distributed by central government according to an arcane set of formulae which no one understands. This has produced some curious results: poll tax in some of the so-called "high-spending" Labour boroughs in London is considerably less than in salubrious areas where thrifty Conservatives are in charge. Other councils, such as the City of Westminster in central London, seem to have gained as a result of a miscalculation in the amount of grant for flood protection.

Although people resent being forced to report all their movements to officials in the town hall, the poll tax might just have been acceptable if the amount to be paid was trivial. But charges are about 30% more than the government predicted; in most areas they are about £300-£400 per head, though in some instances they have been set at the £500-£600 mark - a hefty amount for a household with grown-up children living in.

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher claims that she was elected with a mandate to introduce the poll tax; she used to refer to it as the "flagship" of the Conservative government's policies. There was indeed a certain amount of public support for the poll tax when the idea was first mooted, and nearly every one else responded, in typically British style, with massive apathy. But not for nothing is the lion the symbol of the British. Aware that its tail has been tweaked, the beast has now been roused; neither Kaiser Bill, Adolf Hitler or General Galtieri got away with that. Now that Mrs. Thatcher has finally roused the lion, we can expect that, before long, she too will be devoured.