

OPINION

FIFTEEN MINUTES OF FAME

Back in February residents of Oxford, and a much larger audience online, were treated to a strange but passionate declaration from esrtwhile road protester 'King' Arthur Pendragon, concerning that city's Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTN) scheme.

'To many people in the 21st century', announced the man famously arrested 26 times during the 1990s direct action campaign against the Newbury bypass, 'freedom is a set of keys, and basically any assault on the vehicle is an assault on the person'.

'If they say you cannot go out of Oxford', he went on, 'how are you going to turn up to places like Stonehenge for the Solstice?' In case his point had not got across, he concluded the interview with an impressive bellow of 'Freedom!'.

Perhaps the greatest irony here is that anyone driving from Oxford to Stonehenge these days is very likely to make use of the A34 Newbury bypass. But there are bigger questions involved than Arthur's credibility. There are no evil plans afoot to prevent the good motorists of Oxford from taking their precious cars to Wiltshire. The would-be Once and Future King had apparently been binge-scrolling fake news. In his defence, he was far from alone.

Culture Wars

Others joining Arthur on the barricades to defend 'freedom to drive wherever I like' included Britain's most unreliable weather forecaster Piers Corbyn, whose more famous brother must surely despair. Eccentric Piers was filmed standing in a plant pot leading a chant of 'do not comply!'.

Covering a wide spectrum stretching from idiosyncrasy to something a lot more sinister, the estimated 2,000 attendees also included 1990s one-hit wonders Right Said Fred, GB News presenter Laurence Fox, and a contingent from the far-right group Patriotic Alternative. A local councillor reported that 'people were chanting things including 'refugees are rapists' and 'Jews will not replace us'.'¹

Many had clearly exercised their freedom to drive in from other parts of the country. Inflamed by social media, they successfully hijacked what would no doubt have been a much smaller protest by residents, with specific concerns about the local implications of some fairly modest (and still experimental) traffic reduction measures implemented by the City and County Councils. Previous local protests have also been lively, but the scale and acrimony of this one was something new.²



King Arthur, pictured in less confusing times.

The temperature had not only been raised on Twitter and GB News. In Parliament the previous week, Conservative Nick Fletcher MP demanded a 'debate on the international socialist concept of so-called 15-minute cities and 20-minute neighbourhoods'. Alluding to London as well as Oxford, he complained that 'ultra-low emissions zones in their present form do untold economic damage to any city' and that 'the second step after these zones will take away personal freedoms as well'. Leader of the House Penny Mordaunt archly replied 'I think it is right that people raise concerns'.³

Following the narrow Tory victory in the Uxbridge byelection, the Prime Minister has now announced a 'review' of such policies, and has started calling Labour 'anti-motorist'. The misinformation swirling around this confected issue is part of the diversionary 'culture wars' strategy being employed by an increasingly desperate Government, and amplified by their allies and backers.

Denial

Alleviating urban traffic and improving air quality is not easy, and attempts to do so by restricting vehicle movements certainly raise genuine issues. Poorly designed LTNs can for instance result in significant benefits for higher income people working from home in leafy residential areas, while those who have to drive for work find themselves having to drive further, and those living on already congested main routes breathe even more polluted air as diverted traffic comes their way. This is potentially fertile ground for those seeking to stir resentment they can harness for other purposes.

It should be possible to overcome such challenges with sensible design and careful consultation. Eager local politicians in Oxford, London and elsewhere have perhaps moved too



Puzzling placards at the Oxford protest.



fast, aiming to seize the apparent opportunity presented by Covid lockdowns to normalise much emptier streets. Unfortunately this linkage has helped fuel the disingenuous and toxic rumours of ‘climate lockdowns’, gleefully spread by excrement-stirring provocateurs such as noted traffic management expert Nigel Farage.

Others pushing false ‘climate lockdown’ narratives include Daily Telegraph columnist and climate change sceptic James Delingpole, shady ex-Ukipers UK Column, and conspiratorial freesheet *The Light*, whose June front page carried the unambiguous banner headline ‘No Climate Crisis: carbon dioxide has zero effect on temperatures’.

Perhaps most revealing of all, a group called Not Our Future, headed by climate denier David Fleming, posted an estimated 47,000 leaflets through Oxford letterboxes in their ‘campaign against 15 minute cities’.⁴ The leaflet contains many inaccurate claims about the traffic schemes, followed by this:

‘Reducing your ‘carbon footprint’ may appear laudable but is it actually necessary? ... The climate is changing as it always does. It’s a natural cycle. The planet isn’t ‘on fire’ ... We are not allowed to discuss all this. It’s called climate denial. We can talk about the inconvenience of 15 Minute Neighbourhoods or how it’s bad for local businesses but we mustn’t say there is no justification for them in the first place.’⁵

Reality Check

Neither Oxford’s LTN scheme nor its plan for ‘traffic filtering’ (aimed at encouraging drivers to use the ring road to get around the city rather than cut across it) actually mention ‘Fifteen Minute Cities’. This innocuous idea simply suggests that town planning ought to be structured around people rather than cars, and should aim at enabling people to live in neighbourhoods where their daily needs can be met within a 15 minute walk or cycle ride.

The term was coined in 2016 by Carlos Moreno, a Colombian professor working in Paris, where the principle has been



A member of Right Said Fred bravely stands up for freedom by helping deliver the Not Our Future leaflet.

embraced by the current Mayor. It got much more attention once the pandemic suddenly made everyone very interested in whether they could walk to the shops. More recently, Moreno has been receiving death threats, as has Duncan Enright, head of transport at Oxfordshire County Council.⁶

Some people really do seem convinced that the fifteen minute city is the latest incarnation of a nefarious plot by so-called ‘globalists’ to confine freedom-loving people to their homes. Anyone tempted to take this fatuous theory at face value would be well advised to take a close look at exactly who is promoting it, and ask why this might be happening.

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1. See www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/23329831.patriotic-alternative-supporters-urged-attend-oxford-ltn-protest/ and www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/24/far-right-trying-to-infiltrate-low-traffic-protests-campaigners-warn
2. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/progressingplanning/2023/03/21/15-minute-neighbourhoods-and-the-rise-of-climate-denialism/>
3. www.newstatesman.com/quickfire/2023/02/fifteen-minute-cities-will-be-back-conspiracy-theories-house-commons
4. See www.desmog.com/2023/02/16/revealed-the-science-denial-network-behind-oxfords-climate-lockdown-backlash/ and www.opendemocracy.net/en/oxford-15-minute-not-our-future-city-david-fleming-conspiracy-theory-covid-death-audit-fraud-scam/
5. <https://notourfuture.org/oxford-leaflet-finalised/>
6. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/climate-lockdowns-became-new-battleground-conspiracy-driven-protest-mo-rcna80370>