

The Agit Professionals

A martyr was just the excuse the cause needed to redouble the violence and attract new militant blood to its ranks. The result of the anger seeping through the animal welfare movement was evident even as the anonymous spokesman was saying his piece on Friday morning

In Warwickshire, the home of Christopher Barrett-Jolley, the owner of Phoenix Aviation, the company flying calves out of Coventry airport (where Phipps was crushed to death beneath the wheels of a cattle truck) was besieged by sixty balaclava-clad hoodlums who rampaged through the grounds, terrifying his wife and smashing windows. The attackers were Animal Liberation Front (ALF) sympathisers like Phipps, whose death was being avenged in a way she would have approved. Her boyfriend, Justin Timson, aged 26, said: "She was all for violence against property. The incident at Barrett-Jolley's house was a spontaneous outburst of violence."

The death of Phipps, killed after she broke through a police cordon and flung herself at a lorry carrying calves for export, was bound to provoke mixed reactions: to ALF supporters she was a heroine; to the police, a dangerous nuisance known, along with her mother, as a habitual protester, an agit-professional.

The drift from protest to civil disobedience to outright violence has been unstoppable. The conundrum for the police and authorities is to decide where genuine, legitimate protests ends and where deliberate and potentially violent provocation begins. What were once fringe groups have learned to use middle-class indignation to camouflage their attacks on authority.

In the aftermath of the violence in Plymouth, John Albon, assistant chief constable of Devon and Cornwall, accused the peaceful demonstrators of being just as blameworthy as the violent ones because they provided them with cover. "The middle-class, elderly ladies and people carrying children were sitting and lying down in the road. That behaviour is illegal and they are as much a part of the brick-throwing as anyone else", he insisted.

Nancy, Jill's mother, wife of a retired postman, was the prime mover: she was attracted to the fledgling anti-fur campaign when her children were still small, donating money to animal welfare charities and attending a demonstration in London against seal culling.

She took Jill, then eleven, on her first protest at a fur farm and became hooked. Nancy joined the Coventry Animal Alliance, demonstrating against local fox, occupying farms and becoming area coordinator of the ALF support group, helping activists with fines and legal expenses.

Throughout the 1980's Jill's militancy became increasingly more diffuse. With her mother she joined the amorphous fringe of 'agit-professionals' – some violent, some not – who gather at every big demo. They'd set off on day trips in their battered white van: the poll tax riot, the Anti-Criminal Justice Bill demo, the M11 and Twyford Down demos were all key fixtures.

George Orwell well understood this phenomenon of zealots embracing a sequence of unrelated, single issues when he wrote: "Their belief that they are pure of soul is what makes them so pushy. For if you have embraced a creed which appears to be free from the ordinary dirtiness of politics, a creed from which you cannot draw any material advantage, surely that proves you are right?"

She was a link in a network of dissidents whose activities are of growing concern to the police. At the centre of this web is the ALF, an organisation which is emerging as the biggest threat to public order since the IRA stopped bombing Britain, with the ALF and its offshoot, the Justice Department, responsible for a series of letter and fire bombings targeted at firms and individuals associated with the meat and livestock trade.

So, the question which remains to be answered is this: just how long will this fragile alliance of eco-warriors and middle-class protestors survive?

Those who move from demo to demo are not an easily identifiable group. Some like Class War or the Socialist Workers Part, do have a fixed ideology and organisation, but most are individuals – anarchist or apolitical – who drift from one cause to the next as it reaches the grapevine. The ALF has a long-standing tradition of fostering anarchist links, and many of those convicted of serious offences during the Trafalgar Square poll tax riots also had ALF or hunt saboteur backgrounds.

(Adapted from an article by Margarett Driscoll, published in the *Sunday Times* (Focus), 05.02.1995)

Vocabulary

to seep

calf

to crush

cattle (truck)

to avenged (Cfr. 'revenge')

to fling (fling flung flung)

nuisance

to drift / drift, n.

fringe

aftermath (in the aftermath of...)

fledgling

(seal) culling (< to cull)

Fine, n.

zealot

offshoot

livestock (trade)

to convict s.o. of sthg.

offence