

The revolt of the motorists

The French gilets jaune movement has in part been a protest against the attempts of the elite to limit people's uses of cars and vans. The movement began with demands to cut the taxes on petrol and diesel, and to resist more moves to make motoring ever dearer. Some of the protesters then went on to damage or obscure the cameras checking car speeds on French highways, rapidly taking a majority of them out of use.

The car to many is not merely an important symbol of personal freedom, but a vital means of getting to work, going to the shops, taking children to school and enjoying leisure time away from home. Many people want to learn to drive and acquire a car as soon as they are able, recognising how much more scope they will have to do as they wish in their lives if they have their own transport. The establishments of Europe see the car instead as an enemy of their vision of the future. They impose high taxes to reduce use of vehicles and to price people on lower incomes off the road altogether. They impose tougher regulations to limit the use of certain vehicles in certain places and at certain times. They are now threatening the whole car park of diesel and petrol cars, wanting to push people into owning an electric vehicle or giving up on personal transport altogether. They seem to think people can and should take the bus or train even when they live in rural areas with little or no access to such services.

Of course governments need to impose some rules on car drivers to ensure safer roads. It is sensible to have a testing regime for drivers and vehicles, and sensible to have road markings and road rules to avoid collisions. No-one disagrees with good measures to keep us safe. The problem comes when the rules and requirements multiply to the point where they can be a distraction or a problem for the safe driver, and where the whole exercise is one large attempt to take more money off the motorist with tax placed on tax to drive, own, buy and operate a vehicle.

The intervention in the market by the EU and member state governments to get more people to buy diesel cars worked well, only for the EU then to change its mind and tell us we had been wrong to follow their advice. Now they wish us to believe that if we take on an electric car we will in future be subsidised or taxed a lot less. People are very sceptical, fearing that if electric cars become popular then the subsidies will end and new taxes will be imposed as governments will want to replace the huge lost revenue from taxes on diesel and petrol. They also worry lest some unseen environmental problem with batteries emerges as emission issues arose late in the day with diesels.

In this vexed area of policy the car and van using public see hypocrisy from those who govern them. They seem to have plenty of access to prestigious cars without a thought for the cost as they are provided by the state. If cars are good enough for Mr Macron to get around in, aren't they also necessary for French men and women as they go about their work?