

## FEATURE

## CARBON COPIES?

As we come to terms with the lifestyle changes that will be forced on us by impending climate change, Mark Roodhouse of Rescue!History, an informal network concerned with historical issues related to the climate change agenda, looks at how a previous generation coped with limited supplies of fuel.

Rationing has made an unexpected return to the political agenda as politicians grapple with the problem of reducing emissions of greenhouse gases. Along with taxes on aviation and motoring, changes in building regulations, and road pricing, carbon rationing is receiving serious consideration as a policy instrument to cap and then cut consumption of energy from non-renewable sources. In July 2006 the Environment Secretary David Miliband floated the idea of individual carbon allowances. Every adult would receive an annual allowance of carbon points to spend on motor fuel, gas and electricity for personal transport and household energy. Every unit of energy would have a points value, and consumers would pay for each unit in cash and points. The government would fix the size of individual allocations and set the points value of units of motor fuel and household fuel. Although the parallels with the austerity policies of 1940s Britain are not lost on political commentators, contemporary discussion of carbon rationing is not informed by this experience. Though they would be well advised to dust off the internal histories of clothes rationing and petrol rationing as they contemplate schemes for carbon rationing, today's policymakers have not read the internal histories of rationing in which officials recorded the lessons of the war economy.

As rationing came to an end, civil servants wrote accounts of the various rationing schemes for their successors. They had found the internal histories of food and petrol rationing from the First World War very useful when they had to draw up plans for rationing on the eve of the Second World War and hoped their accounts would help future civil servants

tasked with introducing rationing. Since the de-control of meat in July 1954, which marked the end of rationing, there have been two occasions when the government pulled some of these files from the archives. The first was in the autumn of 1954. Anthony Eden's Conservative government temporarily reintroduced petrol rationing after the Egyptian government's seizure of the Suez Canal. The second was in the autumn of 1973 when Edward Heath's Conservative government prepared to ration petrol in the wake of the first oil shock.

One of the most important lessons learned by officials and found in their published and unpublished accounts of rationing, is that points rationing schemes covering a group of commodities are preferable to specific rationing of individual commodities. Points rationing preserves a degree of consumer choice as people can choose which goods they want to spend their points on. The introduction of a trading element to points rationing would be a definite improvement on the schemes in operation during the Second World War, for example, black market trading in unwanted clothes coupons was rife. Permitting people to donate or sell unused carbon points would prevent the emergence of a similar black market. It might also have a redistributive effect as consumers on low incomes could sell their points to consumers on higher incomes. It is one of the peculiarities of the limited black market trade in unwanted clothing coupons that it benefited both the poor and the rich.

Another interesting lesson to draw from earlier experience is the importance of ensuring that rationing accords with popular notions of fairness. The principle of equality of sacrifice was central to the success of rationing in the 1940s. Policy-makers rejected suggestions that they should allow consumers to freely exchange coupons as they thought low income groups would resent the ability of higher income groups to consume more essential and semi-essential goods. While civilians felt the burden of rationing should be shared equally, popular notions of social justice allowed for the special treatment of certain groups. Vegetarians

received extra cheese rations. Expectant mothers and young children had first call on supplies of exotic fruit. Manual workers and uniformed workers received additional clothing coupons as did young children and expectant mothers. For the sake of administrative simplicity these exceptions had to be kept to the minimum. Consequently, exceptions tended to be for sizeable social groups that were easy to identify. There also had to be widespread public support for the exception. Groups with a 'political nuisance' value also received special treatment. Despite the protests of trade union leaders, manual workers in heavy industries were not given an extra ration of meat, but they were allowed to eat coupon-free at works canteens that received meat supplies.

The principle of equality of sacrifice underpinning modern ideas for carbon rationing is very different to that underpinning rationing in the 1940s. It has been proposed that each adult will receive the same allowance of carbon points, regardless of their circumstances. While this might accord with the notions of social justice advocated by some political philosophers, it is likely to clash with popular understandings of what constitutes a fair share. Civil servants preparing to introduce petrol rationing in 1917, 1939, 1955 and 1973 all distinguished between private and commercial users. Private users received a basic ration of petrol with supplementary allowances for people living in rural areas and people who used their car for work. Commercial users received additional allowances according to the importance of their work for the economy. Similarly, William Beveridge felt certain groups should receive supplementary fuel rations when drawing up a scheme for rationing of coal, gas and electricity in 1942. Groups of people who spent a lot of time at home were to receive additional fuel rations. The elderly, the infirm, expectant mothers and families with children under school age deserved extra rations. Beveridge planned to divide the country into climatic zones with each zone receiving a larger basic ration as you moved north, to compensate for the colder climate. This was practical politics.

The history of Beveridge's scheme is also a salutary warning for supporters of carbon rationing. Despite initially strong support for the introduction of fuel rationing from both within and without Whitehall, the government never introduced the scheme. The President of the Board of Trade Hugh Dalton, Beveridge's political master, made the tactical error of publicizing his intention to ration fuel long before he planned to introduce it. This gave his opponents in the mining industry time to persuade his political adversaries to oppose the scheme. The current government doesn't seem minded to repeat Dalton's mistake as the draft Climate Change Bill gives it the power to introduce carbon rationing without reference to Parliament.

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