

Iraq, The Illegal War, Ten Years On: Curbing the Rights of Antiwar Activists

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It is sad that well-known peace campaigners should drop below the radar, not just of the politicians who hate them, but of the so-called peace campaigners who idolised them when they were still there. One such man, who dedicated the last 10 years of his life to confronting the UK Parliament with their outrageous decision to invade Iraq, was Brian Haw.

As a committed Christian and a father, and angered by the sanctions the West had imposed on Iraq that resulted in the tragic and avoidable deaths of too many Iraqi children, Brian left his home and arrived in London. More particularly, he arrived in Parliament Square, where he camped at the side of the road facing the Houses of Parliament. Always, for those of us who continued to protest about the invasion of Iraq and the awful damage our actions were doing to that nation, Brian was a figurehead, an inspiration. Few of us could claim his courage, his determination and his perseverance.

For nearly ten years he stayed – night after night of sleeping on the pavement, in all weathers and with little protection. Nothing the police or Parliament did could break him and make him move. Brian's protest caused them no end of problems as he and his anti-war placards and banners were a constant reminder of all the lies that were told in the run up to the attack on Iraq in 2003 and continued to be told to justify the invasion. Members of Parliament had to pass his huge collection of displays and peace messages every time they went in and out of the Parliament.

In their haste to be rid of this 'turbulent priest' of a campaigner, who harangued MPs daily with his megaphone as they went into the august halls of Westminster, reminding them of their ghastly error in backing up Tony Blair and his eagerness to invade Iraq, the then Home Secretary David Blunkett introduced the bill SOCPA (Serious Organized Crime and Police Act 2005) which was aimed at removing Brian by banning [protests](#) within 1 km (about half a mile) of Parliament without police permission. This came into effect on 1 August 2005. But where else should we protest for peace if not outside the place that had rubber-stamped Blair's desire to illegally attack Iraq?

Comedian Mark Thomas headed an action to keep protest going within the legal 1 km. He wanted to demonstrate how very ludicrous this ban was. To quote Mark: "The point is simply that if one person with a banner can be deemed to be a protester by the police and they need to get a licence six days in advance to enter the designated zone, then we have reached a state of absurdity." And it is true if hardly believable that one woman in Parliament Square was threatened with arrest for having an iced cake with 'Peace' written on it. On certain days individual [protestors](#), who had each registered their very individual protests with the police (including, for instance, the right to jump off Westminster Bridge)

held their protests within the designated zone. It made the new law look very stupid indeed.

But so hasty had Parliament's action been in creating this law that when it was challenged, they discovered that the one person they had failed to ban was Haw himself! So he stayed – and stayed. For some time he was alone, although visited (and supported) by many well-wishers. He became a tourist attraction. MPs complained that they could not properly debate in the chamber because of the noise of his megaphone protest in the Square outside – presumably the constant traffic noise complete with police and ambulance sirens is conducive to a good debate!

In May 2006 his much-photographed display of placards and banners was reduced from 40 metres to just 3 metres by a night raid of some 78 police (which cost a staggering £27,000). Not so oddly, this happened within hours of artist Mark Wallinger showing two curators from the Tate Gallery Brian's display and announcing he wanted to recreate it for an exhibition. Never the less, Mark had his way and the exhibition, [State Britain](#), ran at the Tate from January to August 2007.

Brian continued to protest with his truncated display despite numerous arrests and assaults. He was on crutches for his last years in the Square – the result of the not-so-gentle arrest techniques of the famed London Bobby. He died of cancer in June 2011 and the world is a poorer place.

Brian was joined in December 2005 by Melbourne-born Barbara Tucker. While Brian had some legal authority to stay there, Barbara didn't, which has meant that she has been arrested an astonishing 47 times while in the square, usually on a charge of `unauthorized demonstration`. When Brian died she nobly carried on. She has served two short spells in Holloway prison as well as suffering constant harassment from police, heritage wardens and passing rowdies.

Until January 2012 she had a tent but that was confiscated under the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act (PRSA). After that she sat in a chair on the pavement trying to sleep under a large green umbrella wrapped up in multiple layers of clothing. She has slept in the open for over a year now without a tent and has been treated for exposure. In the hope of getting her confiscated tent back, Barbara took the decision to go on hunger strike, starting on December 27th 2012.

While Brian managed to achieve some media recognition for his stance, Barbara has had little to none. The latest [reference](#) I can find to her hunger strike dates from January 10th. She and her colleague Neil Kerslake are no longer in the Square and have not been seen for some weeks – disappeared, tidied away perhaps, so as to make the 10th anniversary of the invasion a little less contentious.

One day maybe, when the world stops fighting needless, illegal and cruel wars, people will finally give these dedicated campaigners the recognition they deserve. I'd like to see a statue of Brian in Parliament Square, confronting Westminster and challenging its dishonesty and hypocrisy as he did for so many cold hard years. Until then, those of us who still call ourselves peace campaigners should at least make the effort to remember how much he once meant to us all. Parliament may not like dissenters – I for one do.

Lesley Docksey (with additional information from Paul O'Hanlan)

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