

News

Interview: Fathers 4 Justice

Saturday, 16 Aug 2008 00:01

We interview Matt O'Conner, founder of Fathers 4 Justice, to find out quite how many more superhero stunts angry commuters are going to have to put up with.



Fathers 4 Justice campaign for divorced fathers to be given contact with their children

Yesterday a man dressed as Batman got up on a gantry on the M25 between junctions 14 and 15. He didn't do anything in particular, but drivers experienced 90 minute delays and the media pitched up to ask him questions. Job done.

The public is becoming increasingly used to Fathers 4 Justice, the campaign group who specialise in dressing up as superheroes and generally disrupting things. Whether it's climbing on to Harriet Harman's roof or throwing a purple powder bomb at Tony Blair during prime minister's questions, the group have a way of grabbing the media spotlight.

But yesterday's protest provoked more irritation than usual. As a group, Fathers 4 Justice generally earns more sympathy than most demonstrators, with a large swathe of the public tacitly supporting their campaign to keep fathers in their children's lives after divorce. Tacit support is generally not something you want to put too much pressure on. And for the families driving to Heathrow yesterday for their holidays, Batman may have been the straw that broke the camel's back.

Well, first things first, this wasn't technically a Fathers 4 Justice action.

"I should stress this isn't part of our strategy at the moment," Matt O'Conner, group founder, tells me as he travels to the BBC's Millbank studios.

"This is one individual's action which he did off his own back, but which we support. In terms of direct action we will support people. This one, well, one of our activist coordinators only heard about it last night. But provided it's non-violent direct action we'll support it."

It's a dangerous tactic though, isn't it? One that risks turning the public against you.

"It depends how bad the situation gets," he replies. "At the moment we give people an outlet for their frustration."

"These aren't stunts. These are emergency calls. This is us sounding the alarm about something everyone is aware of – family breakdown. Mass fatherlessness is a problem in this country, but politicians don't seem to recognise it."

"People were caught in traffic for 90 minutes. That's a click of the fingers compared to a man separated from his kids for a week, a month, a year."

It's an old argument, as old as modern protest. No demonstrator worth their salt believes a few people's inconvenience counts as much as war in Iraq, or third world hunger, or fathers separated from their children. The aim of the demonstration is to disrupt the life of the country, forcing politicians to address the reasons for the protest, and to tap the media on the shoulder, making them pay attention.

Sometimes – rarely in this country - it works, but in the process you can alienate a lot of people.

"The sad thing is everything needs to look like an action movie to get in the news," says O'Conner. "They don't want intelligent argument, they need something eye-catching or else you don't get your message out."

It could be worse. Back in 2004 the group was launching simultaneous protests on a pretty impressive scale. The Dartford tunnel, the A40, the M4, the M14 – all on a single day.

"There's nothing new to it," he continues. "In 2004 there was a plan to shut down the M25 entirely and all the railway lines going into London."

I smirk. How exactly were you intending to do that, I ask.

"That would be telling," he replies. I smirk again. I wouldn't be smirking if I was on a train going into London when they did. Or worse – trying to get out of London for my holidays. But you never feel as angry about your inconvenience as the demonstrator does about his cause.

To O'Conner, only direct action has a chance of dealing with his grievances. "The largest constituency of floating voters is single mothers and women. I mean, the swing from when Gordon Brown was popular to when he wasn't was six per cent among men, but 40 per cent among women. Look at what that did to him."

"All the main parties toe the line on this. We won't solve it unless we keep up the pressure, even if traffic disruption is not a current Fathers 4 Justice strategy."

It may not be, but there are plenty of men who share O'Conner's anger, and with Fathers 4 Justice's support they will probably keep on making appearances on your TV screen. So keep an eye out for superheroes on the roads. They're not there to save you. They're there to ruin your day.

Ian Dunt

Speakers' Corner

A-level standards

It's A-level results day – which means a return to the annual debate about exam standards.[more](#)

TUC: Results are testament to hard work

Tories: Govt letting down

disadvantaged kids

Lib Dems: Divide in heart of education

UCU: Results moaning not fair on pupils



Related news

Elderly fingerprints compromise ID cards

The difficulty in scanning elderly people's fingerprints could compromise the government's ID cards scheme, a leaked report has revealed. [Full Story](#)



- 'No such thing as Cameronism'
- Comment: What does Cameron believe in?
- politics.co.uk poll shows strong support for Boris
- Scottish Labour close to naming leader
- MP death triggers by-election
- Analysis: Glenrothes by-election
- Comment: Labour - A tale of two tribes?
- New controversy over counter-terrorism plans
- Former minister hints at Milliband support

Opinion Formers

- Opinion Formers A-Z
- Opinion Formers by issue
- Events diary
- Press Centre

Reference

- Criminal evidence (witness anonymity) bill
- Climate change bill
- Channel tunnel rail link bill

- Consultations
- Issue briefs
- Government ministers
- Legislation
- MPs
- Parliamentary business
- Political guide