

## **Chapter Seven – The Motorcycle Action Group UK**

### **Introduction**

Over the years, motorcyclists have been a source of numerous ethnographic studies (Harris, 1986; Cohen, 1980; Thompson, 1966; MacDonald Walker 2000), but little has been written about the impact of legislation and commercial interest on these individuals. This chapter aims to evaluate how a riders' organization has endeavoured to survive and to maintain the interest of its members by attempting to minimize the impact of government policies.

### **The Motorcycle Action Group (MAG UK)**

In order to determine the effect of government policies and the impact of insurance and security on 'fear of crime', I chose to carry out my research primarily amongst members of MAG UK. This was for a specific reason, MAG UK is one of two Riders' Rights organizations in the United Kingdom that actively promote and defend the rights of motorcyclists. This organization is voluntary, in the sense that its activities are largely dependent on the work of volunteers with the support of a small handful of employees.

*"MAG UK campaigns and lobbies government to promote and protect motorcycling from negative legislation that threatens the pleasure of riders".* (cit. Director of Public Affairs, MAG UK).

Established in 1973 specifically to campaign for the repeal of the mandatory helmet law, MAG UK has since then broadened the scope of its activities. The membership of MAG UK is estimated to be around 10,000 with a further 40,000 members through affiliated clubs.

### **Background**

Over a period of three years, I interviewed MAG UK members which gave me the opportunity to engage with riders who had helped shape the organisation over the last thirty years.

MAG UK has in place a system whereby officials are democratically voted into office by the members of the organization and are bound by its constitution to represent the views and opinions of its members. MAG UK works through a network of local MAG groups. The local groups are arranged into 22 regions and each region has its own Regional Representative. Within each region there can be any number of local groups depending on the density and distribution of population in the region. The members of each local group elect their own Local Representative. All members in each region are likewise entitled to elect their 'Regional Rep'. These Regional Reps comprise the voting members of MAG UK's National Committee (NC).

The organisation has a Chairman, Vice Chairman, a National Committee and elected National Officers. There are five employees, three are office staff. The remaining two are the Director of Public Affairs and the editor of Streetbiker (now 'The Road'), the organisation's bimonthly magazine.

I interviewed one of the longest serving members in July 2003 at a rally and we discussed the development of the organisation and the threats and opportunities that it has faced. I asked him to explain why MAG UK was formed and when. He replied:

*“What MAG started out as, was something extremely simple, it was a bunch of people who didn’t like being told what to wear and the helmet law was really the founding issue. (...) What had been challenged was a fundamental civil liberty. Because what the government was saying was “We have the right to make you do what we think is right for your own good” (...) I couldn’t think at that time of another law which in the same way fundamentally attacked the civil liberties of an individual. (...) Subsequent to the helmet law being passed, they were not able to prove that it had saved any lives what so ever”.*

I asked him how influential MAG UK had been over the years to promote motorcycling and he replied:

*“I think it is very influential now, (...) we’ve become very proactive in that we are trying to generate a culture not only in which motorcyclists are viewed not just as an acceptable form of transport, but as a preferred form of transport and that marks a radical change from the early days, even as late as the late 80s (...). But a lot of people within the government and life generally don’t recognise the extent to which people feel very emotional about motorcycles (...)”.*

In his analysis of pressure groups, Grant (1999) identifies the importance of organizations like MAG UK and argues that “insider groups are regarded as legitimate by government and are consulted on a regular basis. Outsider groups either do not wish to become enmeshed in a consultative relationship with officials, or are unable to gain recognition. Another way of looking at them is to see them as protest groups which have objectives that are outside the mainstream of political opinion. They then have to adopt campaigning methods designed to demonstrate that they have a solid basis of popular support” (ibid: 15).

His view is that MAG UK provides an example of a group which has moved from outsider by necessity to potential insider status. However, he points out that improving the political standing of an organization like MAG is not easy. (...) As the Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Transport, Robert Key, who had accepted MAG's offer of 'a serious cross country bike ride', commented: *“they are great people . . . sometimes the image of motorcyclists is built up by the media, by films ... as very macho, very aggressive and one of the things I like about MAG is that they perform a very useful function in the community’. MAG has made a sustained effort in the 1990s to show ‘that we are a serious pressure group that we really know what we're talking about”* (Magnews, April/May 1994, p. 28; cit.op. Grant. 1999:15).

I interviewed a Director of MAG UK and we discussed the organization’s function as a Rider’s Rights organisation and its image. He explained that

*“We were always perceived in a certain image, the radical group knocking on the doors of parliament, wanting to get in and that didn’t work, so a decision was made that if we wanted to talk to MPs and MEPs, civil servants, then we had to play the part. I think that now it’s a done thing, we go to meetings in suits or tidy trousers and a shirt and tie. However, if we were to turn up now in leathers and biking gear, I don’t think that they would really care. (...). If we want to abide by the law, there needs to be a reason behind it and we’ve found that in most cases there usually isn’t a good reason, which is why we stand up and say that we won’t do that. This is typical of lobbying groups in Parliament, but really, they say the same things and then negotiate usually by compromising, but MAG and FEMA<sup>64</sup> won’t do this. We start*

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<sup>64</sup> Federation of European Motorcyclists Association

*from a position and then fight, so we say the same things and explain the reason and why we want government to do whatever we think is right”.*

Grant explains that “this has been done in a way that has made effective use of limited financial resources. MAG (...) has placed an increasing emphasis on discussions with local MPs and the establishment of contacts with civil servants. Recognizing the importance of the European dimension, it was involved in the establishment of a Federation of European Motorcyclists Association, with an office near Brussels staffed by a MAG UK member. In order to understand the operation of the EU, it sought free advice from political scientists, recommending a list of standard texts to its members. (...) When it has held discussions with ministers, it has raised not only substantive issues, but also questions about how the consultation process is undertaken and who is included. (...) it has shown considerable political sophistication in the way in which it has improved its bargaining position” (1999: 16).

Grant believes that “the value of the insider/outsider distinction is that it focuses attention on the choices that have to be made by groups and government and on the exchange relationship that develops between them” (ibid: 16).

MacDonald Walker’s research on Bikers, Culture, Politics and Power (2000), concludes that riders’ rights movements differ from traditional politics because they do not have a coherent belief system to offer explanations to different aspects of life. However, this point of view fails to recognize that the very existence of these movements is to protect and promote motorcyclists and their way of life which is the *raison d’être* of MAG. By not participating in political debates on issues of life such as terrorism and by focusing on threats to motorcycling, organizations such as MAG have endured for over 30 years. However, as MacDonald Walker points out, there are strong cultural foundations underlying riders’ rights movements such as MAG. She argues that these philosophical concerns stem from the social networks and lived experience of the motorcycling community (...). In relation to current theorizations of the politics of choice (...) MacDonald Walker concludes that the political fight for the right to ride is cultural and that the two (culture and politics) are intertwined. She believes that “they are bikers first and came to political involvement in order to defend a culture perceived to be under attack” (2000:198).

In her book entitled ‘Risk and Blame’, Mary Douglas summarises trust within voluntary organisations and pressure groups and how threats are dealt from within. She argues that “the cosmic plot provides an idiom for bringing hidden hostilities into the open. At one point the threat of being accused controls and at another point it fuels factional discord, allowing the social unit to get rid of elements it cannot contain peacefully. In all these cases, disasters, natural and man made, trigger the enquiries which trace the real distribution of power and its challengers” (1994:77) Douglas suggest that perhaps this language is too dramatic to bridge the gap between anthropological work and the current bemusement about perceptions of risk. “But fetish power, ancestors and cosmic plots are not more dramatic than what we commonly read about impending catastrophe or the vituperations against the deceits of the tobacco industry, advertising interests, the industrial-military complex, and the aggressive ploys of the nuclear industries” (ibid). In Douglas’ view the language of civic criticism should be dramatic.

According to Douglas, another reason why the bridge is difficult is that this sort of analysis takes the focus off physical dangers and turns it inward to the state of trust in political life. She points out that as people are being asked to attend to the physical dangers on the horizon, this argument turns to the kinds of political contests in which they are made to figure. “The

key point is the way that nature is politicised and engages in the legitimisation and de-legitimation of power” (ibid).

Douglas argues that organisations which are most keenly alert to low probability, high consequence danger are religious sects, political lobbies, new political movements, public interest groups, i.e. voluntary organisations. The difficulty they have in holding their membership together and getting common dues paid, the more they are tempted to call in the cosmic plot as a low-cost solution to their organisational problems.

Mancur Olsen (cited in Douglas 1994:74) contends that when there is no coercion and no selective individual benefits – such as in a voluntary organisation, this group is going to be bothered by free-rider problems. Each member will expect to be able to enjoy the public benefits created by the others without anyone noticing whether or not he puts in his bit. Olsen argues that such a group has a problem even in raising funds for its minimum organisation costs and must be judged to be especially fragile and especially vulnerable to internal dissension.

Douglas believes that the voluntary organisations need the existence of ‘the dangerous Other’ to keep membership and she argues that “the first step towards a solution for this kind of organisation when trying to collect contributions and prevent secession, is to draw a clear boundary around members against the outside world, painting the latter as a corrupt and nasty place. Second, it will need to keep the hundred per cent participation rule so as to prevent any one member from seeming to reap more benefits than the others and so creating discord. Further, the organisation works much better if an ambitious power-hungry member is said to reveal those very corrupt tendencies which make the outside world so threatening” (ibid:74).

Douglas maintains that “being committed by internal political needs to make a virtue of equality, this organisation will be led to associate ambition with inequality, corrupt stratification, and the inhumane machinations of the outside world. So long as there are no internal crises, this is enough of a shared metaphysic to promote latent intentions that the organisation should survive” (ibid:74).

Finally, Douglas comments that voluntary organisations are prone to factionalism. She identifies faction leaders as a threat and accordingly “one way to control them is to accuse them of treacherous alliance with the bad outside world. The more the internal crises heat up, the more it suits the latent goals of the organisation for everyone committed to it to shade their eyes, staring at the horizon, spotting there, the signs of conspiracy and cosmic disaster which can only be staved off for the world if everyone converts into the egalitarian doctrines of the group. In a more extreme case, the disasters on the horizon justify expelling the unpopular faction leader” (ibid:75).

Due to the structure of MAG UK, the regions are fundamental to its financial strength. Specifically there are two regions which provide the bulk of funds. This is achieved from the profits of the rallies that are held each summer<sup>65</sup>. By reading the archives of MAG from the minutes of the first meetings in 1973 and publications over a twenty year period, I found that over the years there have been personalities in MAG who have suffered the fate of the ‘cosmic plot’ as described by Douglas. Though, in spite of (or because of) the identification of potential ‘conspirators’, the organisation has survived and continues to thrive.

With regards to the outside world as a nasty and corrupt place, the increase in insurance premiums in 1991 was the catalyst for a campaign against motorcycle theft which began at

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<sup>65</sup> In one of these regions, their major rally held as a fund raiser attracts around 9,000 motorcyclists at this one event.

the beginning of 1992 by the organisation. Motorcycle theft appears to have provided the instrument to identify the division between the organisation and the ‘dangerous outside world’ as described by Mary Douglas.

### **The Motorcycle Action Group (MAG UK) and Motorcycle Theft**

On 13th November 1991, Motorcycle News, the most important weekly publication for motorcyclists in Great Britain, dedicated four pages<sup>66</sup> to communicate the announcement by Norwich Union, one of the biggest motorcycle insurers in Great Britain that it had decided to restrict policies for motorcyclists less than 28 years of age and to increase premiums for motorcyclists in general. This insurer claimed that the reason for this was due to high levels of theft. At a glance, there was no reason to doubt them, because there had been a steady rise in property crime since 1988, with an increase of 16% in 1991 and 3% in 1992<sup>67</sup>. Although there were no crime statistics issued by the Home Office to identify whether motorcycle theft had increased over that period<sup>68</sup>.

Ever since that announcement was made in 1991<sup>69</sup> the motorcycling press and motorcycling associations have constantly alerted motorcyclists about the risk of theft and the need for security. Organisations involved in motorcycling, including the Motorcycle Industry Association (MCIA) and voluntary pressure groups such as the MAG UK, took the claim at face value. In other words, there was never any doubt that motorcycle theft was a problem because there were no alternative data available to counter this claim – until in 2003 when the Home Office published its first ever analysis of motorcycle theft in Britain.

From the early 1990s, the government, insurers, the motorcycle industry and voluntary organisations were fundamental in raising awareness of motorcycle theft. This brought the development of coordinated teams of ‘experts’ under the auspices of the Home Office. The Motorcycle Crime Reduction Group (MCRG): In April 1999 the Government set up the Vehicle Crime Reduction Action Team (VCRAT) with a target of reducing vehicle crime over a five year period by 30%. (In chapter eight the structure of the MCRG will be discussed in further detail).

In the event, MAG UK not only accepted Norwich Union’s (and subsequently the remaining insurance companies) reasons for increasing insurance premiums but it supported them (as did the government and industry) by blaming thieves for the problem. MAG UK became the driving force in the fight against motorcycle theft in this country, with other organizations following their lead.

In an interview with a member who had held a prominent position within MAG UK for eleven years, I asked when the problem of theft of motorcycles began and when MAG became involved - he replied:

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<sup>66</sup> Motorcycle News pages 9 to 12, carry articles entitled ‘Union Bashing’; ‘Insurers hit panic button’; ‘High cost of keeping thieves at bay’, all in reference to the announcement that Norwich Union and subsequently Devitt’s DA and TT motorcycle insurance intended restricting motorcycle insurance, due to the high level of motorcycle theft.

<sup>67</sup> “When the property market nose-dived in 1990/1991 and the recession began to bite, according to an insurance report, many insurers found to their cost that their mortgage guarantee business, far from being the goose that laid the golden egg that they had thought it was during the preceding boom years, was in fact rather more like a turkey. Many insurers promptly withdrew from the market whilst others sought to cover their losses by restricting other areas of insurance”. (report General Insurance and the Public Interest - downloaded 23 March, 2006)  
[http://www.actuaries.org.uk/files/pdf/library/proceedings/gen\\_ins/1999gic/gipubint.pdf](http://www.actuaries.org.uk/files/pdf/library/proceedings/gen_ins/1999gic/gipubint.pdf)

<sup>68</sup> The Home Office published its first report on the Extent of Motorcycle Theft in 2003.

<sup>69</sup> Prior to this communication, MAG NEWS issue (August/September 1991) carried an article entitled ‘Bike Insurance to Soar’ which gave details of a consultation document by the Lord Chancellor’s department looking at a proposal of ‘no fault’ compensation. This was the first mention of any problems with insurance in the members’ magazine.

*“I guess it was 1990-91 (...), certainly by ‘93 there was a real climate of fear verging on paranoid concern amongst motorcyclists that their bike would be stolen – like medium and larger capacity machines. (...) What the cops said was that people used to go and do an armed robbery at a post office and get £2-£3000 and risk getting 14 years in jail for it had realised that they could go and nick a bike that they could cash in for £2-£3,000 with no where near the risk of the same penalty if they were caught. I mean you don’t go to jail for thieving bikes – you read every week how somebody’s nicked a bike and gets community service. So there was a lot of theft going on and there was a massive tightening in the insurance market because of the cost of theft being so bad”.*

I then asked him who had actually approached MAG to say that theft was a big problem and he replied:

*“No one person or organisation came to us and said that bike theft was a problem. Hundreds if not thousands were saying simultaneously that it was a problem. All the bike magazines were reporting theft more and more. It became a real climate of fear and concern (...). We got involved in the Theft Action Group which comprised of ourselves, representatives of the industry and representatives of retailers, (...) the insurance companies – one of which was Norwich Union; the other was the brokers Devitts (...). We were the ones who were putting in money that kept the Theft Action Group going and we were probably the poorest organisation represented (...).*

In the 1992 February March issue of MAGNEWS, a centre spread was dedicated to the problems of increased insurance and theft. The headings on pages 22 commences with: ‘Will Biking Survive?’ and comments “everyone involved is to blame to a greater or lesser extent for the insurance increases. Bike theft has been escalating for years and it’s the biggest reason for the increases”. Under the heading ‘Wake up and do it!’ - on the same page, a list of suggestions was published for riders which included security tips and advice from the police as well as identity marking products and advice about insurance. This article was then followed by the heading ‘Theft Group Agreed Action’ under which a series of short and long term initiatives by government, police, insurance, security companies and public interest organisations are identified.

On the following page in MAGNEWS, two articles explain how MAG UK had come to a business arrangement with a security company to identify motorcycles (specifically discounts for members in exchange for publicity for the product). The process of this type of security is by creating a unique number which is stencilled on various parts of the vehicle in order for the police to identify the vehicle if it were stolen. The last article relating to motorcycle theft in the 1992 February March issue describes the contract entered into with an insurance broker identified as the MAG insurance facility scheme. The purpose of this scheme was “to negotiate from a position of strength to reduce the premium increased and get discounts” (page 23).

In the December January 94/95 edition, Issue 78, the article ‘Double Boost for MAG’s Anti Theft Campaign announced that a policeman from Scotland Yard ‘joins’ MAG’s National Committee to become MAG’s Anti Theft Officer. This was followed by a further announcement that ‘Norwich Union Backs MAG Reward Scheme and explains that “Norwich Union had agreed to joint with the Motorcycle Action Group in underwriting the MAG Anti-theft Reward Scheme” (page 19). The policeman played an active role within MAG and wrote articles in a page dedicated to the issues of motorcycle theft regularly in the members’ magazine MAGNEWS until mid 1998 (Issue 99, June/July 1998). Throughout the 1990s through to 2003, the members’ magazine was very influential in disseminating news about

motorcycle theft, as well as promoting security products and insurance discounts for MAG members.

In my interview with another senior member, we discussed motorcycle theft and MAG UK. I commented that from reading through the MAG archives, I noted everybody became involved. I asked him whether the 'theft' campaign had been beneficial for MAG members and motorcyclists in general. He replied:

*"I think at the very start it created an "us and them" scenario and pulled MAG together. (...) Bikers don't see their bikes as an inanimate object but as a friend or animal, like a pet. So that enemy sort of gelled the organisation together and that had a positive effect on MAG as a community because it was being attacked. What that whole story was based on was what people like the police and insurance companies were telling MAG and we had no reason not to believe it, so we kept it going. Theft is an issue that is personal, it happens to yourself, but then you have the whole aspect of how you are treated afterwards, by the insurance companies, the police, the authorities and so forth and that adds to the problem".*

## **Conclusion**

These comments and those from the preceding interview highlight how MAG UK became a victim of its own success, because they placed their trust in the insurance industry and because they believed the articles in Motorcycle News that motorcycle theft was a major problem. Paradoxically, by supporting the insurance industry and government in the fight against motorcycle theft, MAG inevitably became part of the process of increasing awareness of motorcycle crime. At that point in time (1991-1992) motorcycle theft may have been a major problem, but there were no data from government to confirm or deny any potential problem with theft. The only organizations to have data about theft were the insurance companies and they were (and still are) not required divulge it.

MAG's motorcycle theft campaigns during the 1990s appear to have played an important role in exacerbating the perception of motorcycle theft. Thus unwittingly, these campaigns may have assisted in creating an atmosphere of 'fear of crime' amongst riders. The MAG UK campaigns were based on trust in the insurance and security industries and government. In the following two chapters I discuss the results of the surveys I carried out through this organization in consideration of the apparent heightened awareness of motorcycle theft in Great Britain.