

Petrol rationing - how the Cubans do it

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Havana.- For most of the world, the petrol crisis is something new, but Cuba has been living with it since 1960. In June of that year, foreign-owned petroleum refineries in Cuba refused to process a couple of barge loads of Soviet oil bought by the new Cuban revolutionary government at advantageous prices. In response, the Cubans took over the Texaco refinery and, a few weeks later, the U.S. government announced suspension of the Cuban sugar quota while the major oil ~~import~~ companies clamped down an embargo on deliveries to the island.

Cuba was faced with economic catastrophe. Without petroleum, transportation and machines would soon come to a grinding halt. It was then that the Soviet Union stepped in and offered to supply Cuba's petroleum needs. Since then, on the average of about once every sixty hours, a Soviet oil tanker sails into a Cuban port.

Cuba had ~~seen~~ ambitious economic plans and fuel consumption rose steadily over the first years of the sixties. As compared with 1958, consumption of fuel oil in 1967 had increased by 53%; gas oil, 135% and petrol, 30%. The rise was due to the growth of industry, ~~and~~ agriculture, the fishing fleet, public transport and the merchant marine. For instance, from 1960 to 1967, Cuba imported 35,000 tractors, 5500 dump lorries, 3000 passenger buses from the socialist bloc, 928 ⁴Island buses, 7300 jeeps, 1600 bulldozers, and 870 excavators and cranes.

By 1967 the Cubans faced a fuel shortage. The Soviet Union was asked to ship an extra 70,000 tons of fuel oil, 25,000 tons of gas oil and 20,000 tons of petrol. The demand for the extra petrol was met but the Soviet Union was only prepared to meet a little more than half of the fuel and gas oil requirements. It was then that the Cuban government had to face the problem of cutting down on fuel consumption.

Petrol Rationing

Petrol rationing for privately owned autos began in early 1968. Monthly rationing was fixed according to motor size.

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The months ration for an eight cylinder car is 25 U.S gallons (1 U.S. gallon = 3.785 liters = .833 Br. gallons); 6 cylinder cars, 20 U.S. gallons; four cylinder cars, 8 gallons and motorcycles, 4 gallons. Rationed petrol per U.S. gallon costs 60 centavos (31 pence).

From the 1st to the 10th of each month, car owners pick up their monthly ration stamps at the garage nearest their homes. The monthly ration books are made up of detachable pages, each page representing a specific quantity of petrol. For instance, the owner of a car which is allotted eight gallons of petrol month, receives a ration book with four two-gallon stamps. The automobiles license number is written on each stamp and the garage attendant is prohibited from dispatching petrol to cars whose license is other than that written on the stamp. This, of course, is impossible to police and if the garage attendant knows the person, he overlooks a little detail like the number. This permits, in practice, the widespread transfer of ration stamps. If your brother-in-law's car is out of order, he can pass the stamps on to you -- if you have a "socio" (pal) at some garage. The Cubans, with their undiminished sense of humor, talk about "socio-lismo", a take off on the word socialism.

For a few years after rationing began, there was a blackmarket in petrol. If one was willing and able to pay £2/60p for a U.S. gallon of petrol, it was usually available. The Cuban government later eliminated the petrol black market by the simple expedient of permitting car owners to buy all the petrol they desires - at £1/ 5d a U.S. gallon. The price is prohibitive for most and acts as a limiting factor on petrol consumption. For those who have a better economic situation, however, it means that there is no rationing.

For the most part, petrol rationing has worked smoothly in Cuba. If Britain decides to go on petrol rationing, the Cuban system might serve as a useful example.