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Is the Big Green Gathering another victim of the crackdown on dissent?

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Organisers of the long-running festival have reason to believe that an excuse was contrived to bankrupt them

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Is it paranoia, or are they really out to get us? Most of the time it's paranoia. Every week I'm approached by people whispering about vapour trails from planes being used to control our minds, free energy devices suppressed by oil companies or missile attacks on the twin towers. Sometimes, as we saw at the G20 protests on 1 April or at climate camp last year, they are out to get us. The policing of these events shows that some of the UK's public authorities really do regard political activism as a threat that must be contained or eliminated.

So what do you make of this story? Right now the last stragglers should have been packing up their tents at the end of the [Big Green Gathering](#). It's a festival in Somerset that attracts about 20,000 people to listen to music, plan protests and raise money for green causes. It has been running since 1994 and there has never been any significant trouble.

But this year the gathering **didn't happen**. On Friday 24 July, five days before the festival was due to open, the district council applied to the high court for an injunction against it. If they failed to abide by the injunction, the directors of the Big Green Gathering could have their assets seized and be fined or sent to prison.

The council's witness statement contained an impossible bind. It maintained that "the requisite consents cannot at this late stage be granted", then went on to explain that the order "contains a proviso which will permit this event to run" - as long as the gathering obtains the requisite consents. No one could blame the organisers for accepting defeat, handing back their licence and cancelling the festival. The Big Green Gathering will now go bankrupt. It's unlikely ever to happen again. Cock-up or conspiracy?

As any old hippy will tell you, festivals aren't what they used to be. Gone are the days when you could announce a happening, call up a few mates with drums and guitars, and put the word out that something groovy and free was about to kick off. In these buttoned-down times, it would be treated like an al-Qaida training camp. Today, you must apply for a licence and spend months of your life filling in forms and liaising with the various responsible authorities. There are good reasons for this: it ensures that no one is crushed to death and that local people aren't harried by intolerable noise and disruption. There are also bad reasons: the controlling, snooping, curtain-twitching state tendencies which insist that all spontaneity be planned six months in advance, that no one can ever take her top off or smoke homegrown weed or get a little bit outrageous - even within a festival site - for fear of offending some tight-arsed busybody in desperate need of a life.

The organisers applied for their licence in February, and spent the intervening months trying to meet the conditions. These included 450 security guards, a steel perimeter fence and watchtowers, and free wristbands for 12 undercover police officers, who could move through the crowds ensuring that no one was enjoying themselves too much. The site would have more of the ambience of a prison camp than a hippy festival, but at least it would conform to regulations.

The gathering submitted a 100-page management plan. On 30 June the various authorities (police, fire, environmental health, county council and the rest) said they were satisfied with the arrangements. The district council gave the festival a licence. But in July the security company suddenly demanded that the gathering pay the whole fee up front. The festival refused and hired another company, which would take some of the money after the event.

So there was a cock-up. But it doesn't wholly explain what happened next. On 23 July, the organisers were suddenly confronted with a list of demands that they believed they had already met. The Devon and Somerset fire brigade demanded to know that the company hired by the festival, Midland Fire Services, had "an acceptable level of competency". As Midland Fire

Services has been employed by the gathering for several years without complaint, and as it does the same job for the Royal Tattoo, [Womad](#), the Reading and Leeds festivals and other public events, the organisers couldn't understand why, at the 11th hour, its competence was suddenly being challenged. The fire brigade hasn't been able to answer my questions.

But the real sticking point was the road closure order. To keep its licence, the festival would need an order from Somerset county council to shut the local roads to any traffic except the gathering's. The organisers thought it was a formality: there had never been a problem before. Out of the blue on Friday 24 July, the county council told the gathering that its maps were incomplete, and that its signs did not conform to regulations and some of them "are located within North Somerset and therefore we cannot approve their use".

The organisers responded that the maps and signs are the same ones they had used in previous years, since when the regulations haven't changed, and that the county council claims jurisdiction over the whole of Somerset, including the north. It approved the same signs in the same places in 2006 and 2007. But - or so it seemed - the county council would not budge. The application the district council sent to the courts insisted no road closure order had been granted. Strangely, however, the only authority that did not submit a witness statement was Somerset county council.

So the organisers surrendered the licence, cancelled the festival, and set about the sorry task of clearing the site. But as they were doing so, an odd thing happened. They found two notices, one on a fence post, another in a hedge. I have photos of them. They are issued by Somerset county council and dated 20 July 2009. They announce the closure of the roads leading to the festival.

So was a road closure order issued or not? Somerset county council sent me a response but didn't answer my question about whether or not an order had been granted. The county council, the district council, and Avon and Somerset police insist they have done everything to facilitate the gathering, but that the organisers hadn't got their act together.

The organisers allege a deliberate attempt to bankrupt the Big Green Gathering: they say that the authorities left their new objections until the last minute. This meant that they carried on spending right up to the eve of the festival, and that by then it was too late to get legal advice and mount a challenge. They point out that if the road closure order had, in reality, been issued, the main sticking point was a fake one: the authorities had manufactured an excuse to close them down.

Are they being paranoid? I don't know. But it looks pretty odd to me.

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