

Cruise has been sited. Greenham is not what it was. The Geneva talks have started. CND faces a new situation.



CND's NEW ERA

Interview with
Joan Ruddock

by Sarah Benton and Bill Norris

Can we start off with the recent arms talks in Geneva, which people seem to be slightly optimistic about? What can these negotiations achieve?

Unhappily, none of us can be expecting very much though our hope is always that something could happen. The American administration's offer of arms talks was very much an election ploy by Reagan which he is now obliged to carry out. But it has been set up in such a way as to make failure much more probable - that the star wars programme will become the stumbling block, and if it does it will be possible for the Americans to say it was the Soviet Union that made the talks impossible.

Is it your view that for as long as Reagan is president of the United States, such negotiations are going to achieve very little in terms of arms limitation?

Not necessarily, because even in Reagan's presidency anything could happen. It's not impossible to imagine that there could be some sort of backlash in the United States, if it looks as though they won't make some concessions to the Soviet Union in terms of a star wars initiative. It's also possible, of course, that Reagan doesn't physically survive the term of the presidency. But if everything continues as during the last Reagan administration, then nothing significant will be achieved. Nonetheless I believe CND should make an input.

Within CND there has been a debate on and off for years over the relative blame of the Soviet Union and the USA for the arms race. In your view what are the fundamental differences between the Soviet and American governments' attitudes towards this issue? And what is your own personal view of the way the last CND conference tried to resolve the problem of allocating responsibility for the arms race.

I don't think, to take the second question first, that the conference was, even in the original resolution, trying to say that there was

equality between the superpowers in terms of the arms race. That wasn't what motivated the people who put forward the resolution, what motivated them was the fact that we were not seen to be criticising the Soviet Union when criticism was due as strongly as we criticise the US. Of course the recent history of the arms race has been that the United States has been the one that has actually created most of the difficulties in the process of trying to make controls and so the Soviet Union has been seen to be less to blame - I think quite rightly. But when we have criticised the Soviet Union, for example on the recent forward deployment in Eastern Europe, the message has not been seen to be getting across. Interestingly enough, when we had a demonstration that linked the USA and the USSR in the nuclear arms race, saying that both were responsible, it got virtually no press coverage. I think the concern is mainly that we were never being seen by the public to criticise the Soviet Union.

What defence objectives do you think the British government will pursue in the next few years? Do you think it achieved its main aims, like siting cruise here, in its first term of office, or has it got other major plans that it wants to get through before the next general election?

I think the Government is probably still very much committed to Trident and would like to get the Trident programme into a position where it could not be overturned. In addition, they are obviously continuing to give support to the total American strategy, even though on the star wars question it looked for a moment as though Margaret Thatcher was about to step out of line, but she very quickly backed down.

There are splits over Trident within the Conservatives and also within the armed services, many people in the navy being worried about the money being soaked up by Trident. Do you think there is any value to be gained from exploiting those divisions, should CND be adjusting itself to some quite right wing people who might be potential allies in the battle against Trident?

I don't think we have to adjust ourselves to those people but what we must do is decide that it's a political priority to lobby them, to make contact with them and be prepared to argue the simple case against Trident. Conference voted it as a priority but at the moment CND is finding it a bit difficult to adjust to new priorities, Cruise still dominates our thinking.

What must happen for that campaign to become the priority it needs to be?

As I think your question implies it's a different kind of campaign, it would involve a lot of intense lobbying, a tremendous amount of direct contact with MPs who are essentially very hostile to CND; it would involve our local groups, for example, in lobbying Tory MPs that are sitting in many of their constituencies, and it's not easy for a mass campaign that has focused very much on Cruise, Greenham and direct action to make the adjustment.

Lobbying requires quite sophisticated political skills, doesn't it? It's a small number of people, not a mass movement.

And there's always the fear that because we are committed to a very fundamental aim which is to remove all nuclear weapons, if you start dealing with an issue such as Trident, somehow we'll be

contaminated, that we'll lose our sense of direction. I think as long as you're aware of the danger, it's absolutely OK to do it and nearly everyone is aware of the dangers. But this can temper people's efforts or enthusiasm from getting on with that particular job. But it's important we do it because there is a great gain to be made there. Not just a tactical gain in being able to say that that programme has been cancelled due to the pressure of the peace movement. There's a huge gain because it is a major escalation in weapons, part of the whole new nuclear war fighting strategy that NATO has adopted. Stopping it would therefore have a wider NATO significance. Moreover, the Soviets have positively said they would do something if Trident was scrapped. It was a surprise to me, but it makes it even more useful.

On this problem of CND getting more involved on different defence systems, to what extent should it try and tackle different forms of defence strategy?

The movement has been consistent in not adopting any alternative defence strategy or non-nuclear defence strategy, indeed any particular defence strategy at all. It has been content to adopt the position that the absolute priority at the present time is for Britain to get rid of nuclear weapons. People are very wary of trying to get the movement to adopt one particular position beyond this. Of course, a number of ideas have been articulated either in our publications or through surveys we have done of the membership. I know through speaking at many many public meetings organised by groups that the basic position for most people seems to be that whatever defence Britain has it should be one of non-intervention, that it should only be concerned with territorial defence. And from my experience the majority of people would accept some sort of conventional weaponry. A minority of the movement is pacifist and would not support any weapons, themselves, but they might well go along with it for the movement. That, I think, is broadly and necessarily the position. But we should contribute to the debate, and most of us believe that political parties are not in the same position. They need a programme.

One of the main barriers to further growth in CND's popularity appears to be the fear that Britain will be left without a defence policy. This was also a serious problem for Labour in the last election. Do you not feel that it is internal problems within CND which are preventing CND taking up a clearer line on alternative defence?

No I don't. It's true that there are internal pressures which would mean that any attempt to get the movement to adopt a policy would be very difficult and would expose us to a lot of attention in terms of internal struggle which would be undesirable. But I am sure that's not the reason for not doing it. The real reason is that the majority of people feel that it is not necessary for the campaign, it's not desirable for the campaign to actually have a specific defence alternative. What was needed at the time of the general election was not for people to vote on CND's position but on the policies of political parties. CND was not a party to the general election and never will be. So the problem, if there is one, about fear of defencelessness, is for the opposition parties, not for CND. It was the failure of the Labour Party to address itself to that question that was a factor in Labour losing the election. And it is for them to solve that problem.

CND, of course, is politically non-aligned. One of the ways in which it intervened in the last election was to ask people to go to their MP,



regardless of party, and put questions about defence to him or her and then vote according to the replies of the candidates on those issues. That had very little effect. Do you think it was a good election tactic?

We didn't ask members to vote on the basis of those questionnaires. What we were trying to do was to provide people with information so that they were informed when they came to vote. Obviously if they were supportive of CND they would be looking to find the candidate with the closest position. Now that is the kind of lobbying activity that should have been going on for several years prior to the general election. It's not something you can suddenly do at the time of a general election and expect to have any kind of impact. It was an important piece of information gathering at the time, but it's not political strategy. As you say, it has very little effect.

CND is finding it a bit difficult to adjust to new priorities, Cruise still dominates our thinking.

Do you think the debate about nuclear defence at the time of the election was irrelevant to the outcome of the election or did it play a part in how people voted?

I doubt if it played very much part in how people voted. But I think it has had a very serious negative effect on the position of the Labour Party *vis-a-vis* the defence question.

Why is that?

What people are most likely to have remembered about defence and disarmament is the fact that the Government managed to make fools of the Labour Party at the time of the election. People had a lack of confidence in Labour on this question, because clearly they couldn't argue the case, there were many different cases being put forward. It was the obvious way to make people

feel that Labour wasn't able to govern, that they couldn't be trusted with the nation's defence.

Is this because the Labour spokespersons themselves were ignorant or ill informed about the issues or that they themselves didn't believe in the policy that Labour had by the time of the election?

There were some people who were ill-informed, there were undoubtedly some people who didn't agree with the policy and, as we all know, Callaghan and Healey both spoke out indicating that they didn't agree with the policy. But more importantly I don't think, apart from Michael Foot, there was much enthusiasm for arguing the policy, because they were afraid of the domestic repercussions, they were afraid of people's reactions, they had swallowed the propaganda of the Government. They were unsure and unpractised in actually arguing the case. I understand that a decision was taken to give it a very low profile on the eve of the election.

Were you disappointed or surprised by that?

No, because I knew enough about what was going on. But if you've got a policy which is very hard to sell, and let's admit that from the point at which they were starting it was a hard policy to sell, the only thing you can do is go out and sell it hard. You cannot try to hide a policy on which you are perhaps most vulnerable, you have to go out and really campaign for it. So tactically it could not have been handled worse really.

If there was a general election tomorrow how much would the situation have changed?

Not very much.

And if there was an election in two or three years time, what can be done to change the situation, what can CND do about that?

Let me say first what the Labour Party might do. If I were on the Labour Party National Executive Committee, I would be wanting a party campaign on defence and disarmament as the priority, because anybody who is involved in the labour movement can make a reasonable job of campaigning on unemployment, the health service, or education, it's the gut programme of every Labour politician, but they cannot easily argue about the campaign for disarmament. There's a huge need for education about how to campaign, about what the policy really means. As far as I know that isn't happening, and unless it does the party won't be in a better position. Now as for CND, it is trying to make its resources available to people in any party, including Labour of course, who are interested and prepared to accept us. It's in our interests to seek support within any party. I would be amazed, though delighted, if any of the major parties came to CND and said we'd like to talk to you about how we campaign on this issue. This reluctance is a bit surprising. If the issue is such a problem, such a dead duck, how could CND have grown in the way it has, how could it have the kind of membership that it's got? How could this be a major debate if it were an impossible topic on which to engage the public's attention? It couldn't have happened and that's why it seems to me to be defeatist when political parties say this is a policy we can't afford to go out and campaign on.

The implications of what you are saying seem to suggest two strategic aims: firstly, only the Labour Party is likely to enact a policy which

will allow non-nuclear defence to be a possibility, and secondly, that can only happen if the leaders of the Labour Party are in sympathy with it. Now the implications of that would appear to be that an enormous amount of energy has got to go into the Labour Party, agitating to make sure they stick to the manifesto, and elect the right sort of MPs and so on.

Labour wasn't able to govern, that they couldn't be trusted with the nation's defence.



Addressing CND rally - Hyde Park, Oct '83.

Objectively it would appear at the moment that only the Labour Party is likely to be able to form a government where non-nuclear defence becomes a possibility. But CND is committed to maintaining its links across all the parties. If we had said that only the Labour Party is of interest to us, the last election would have been a much greater disaster for CND than it turned out to be. But we've maintained our autonomy apart from the Labour Party and tried to campaign with any politician from any party who is prepared to have any contact with us. Because of this, I think our integrity was much more intact after the election than it would otherwise have been. So whereas Labour is likely to be the only party able to pursue such a policy in government, it doesn't follow that CND should only put its energies into the Labour Party. The position of the Liberals within the Alliance is very important. Most Liberals are actually supporters. It would be quite wrong for us to stop having any interest in the Alliance.

From the late 70s through to the last election, there was a very specific situation which no longer exists. The Left was fragmented, it could offer no major ideological lead, or indeed values about how society should be lived, and CND was there offering not just a lead on unilateralism but suggesting all sorts of other values about life. It wasn't a single issue campaign, it involved many more questions. There was a feeling that people would react against Thatcherism. Cruise had not yet arrived, so there was great hope that if it was prevented it would be an important success for the peace movement. And, with no serious arms talks on the agenda, there was every role for a mass movement to play. There was this tremendous moral upsurge. And one of the CND's great strengths is moralism, maybe a lack of politics but a great moralism. You can see now how all those elements came together in that period to create a very powerful, very spontaneous movement which didn't need a strong central leadership.

Since then there have been several failures. You have distanced yourself from the debacle of the general election, but it was seen by some as a failure. Cruise is here, the support around Greenham is significantly less. People who may have been very optimistic, perhaps

in an unsophisticated way, in the early 80s are probably slightly less so now, since Thatcherism didn't produce a great reaction against it. How important were these various conditions for CND's great growth and do they still exist now? If they don't, what sort of movement is CND going to be?

It was also to do with the growth of other radical elements during that period that weren't in the Left, that were elsewhere, such as the women's movement and the green movement. I accept what you are saying about the conditions being right for that growth to be possible, and the conditions are different today. We do have to ask ourselves where we go from here. We are asking ourselves that all the time. But what is on our side is that very large numbers of

being sophisticated, are we not talking about a different CND - one which is going to be more professional, more into parliamentary lobbying, more into going to Barrow shop stewards and having detailed discussions with them on production for social use?

It's actually doing all of those things . . .

But it's not something in which the ordinary grass roots member of CND can be involved, is it?

It's possible to have both things operating in parallel, providing you maintain sufficiently good communication throughout the movement. When you talk to local group people, they are generally in favour of the so-called professional things that CND has been doing. They want us to put resources into places where some of the power is, such as the House of Commons. Most people's moral fervour of wanting to get rid of nuclear weapons doesn't extend to saying that a person's job ought to go because I have my beliefs - so they want us to tackle arms conversion. But alongside that, we must sustain the tremendous enthusiasm in the movement, the kind of actions that anybody can do in their own community and the kind of big demonstrations that anybody from anywhere can come to. I don't think it's a choice. We need both.

So, as CND moves into a new era, what are the priorities, what is going to fall away and what is going to become more important?



people have not just felt these things, and perhaps gone out and done something like joining a demonstration, they have actually taken the trouble to join an organisation and become part of a structure. People have actually opted to federate, they haven't wanted to remain as 'X against the missiles' doing their own thing. Greenham is an exception to that, but it has become a huge federation in itself. The groups have wanted to affiliate to CND, and then, once in, gone on forming regional structures. There is a preparedness for linkage. Moreover, there is no reduction in the growth of the movement, there is no lack of enthusiasm because of the election. So there is an organisation there, an infrastructure that is self-sustaining both in terms of its willingness to campaign, enthusiasm for the cause and its ability to raise money on a very substantial scale. Given all that, it is possible to proceed from the kind of situation that you have described to a new situation. Now whether we can achieve that is a completely different question, I don't know any better than anybody else.

But if you look at the way in which resolutions came forward at the conference, and the way in which the national demonstration at Barrow on Trident was conducted, then there is a desire to be very realistic about what the movement is about. Barrow, for example, was very significant in trying to respond to the needs of workers who could become unemployed through cancellation, trying to think through in a more mature way than perhaps is usual, about the people who would be affected by our idealistic policies. It is extremely difficult to do. But we have got to be capable of doing more of that if we are going to sustain the campaign and move into a new era.

Moralism has been one of CND's great strengths, it's rattled the Tories more than anything. And it can be a way of involving people in politics who are normally quite alienated from it. A set of moral values is a form of access to public life which is not normally available to people if they have to argue the finer points of Labour Party policy. Now if you are saying that to a certain extent the conditions for that simple set of moral values have gone, we've got to be more realistic, which also means

We have to be much more considered about the mass mobilisation we attempt to co-ordinate. We ought not to be rushing into actions or print or whatever on a continuous basis because that's what we've always done. We are very action-orientated and this year we are going to be again, but a lot of people believe that we ought to be thinking what is the fundamental position to which we are trying to win people and do you best achieve that by a whole series of actions. So I would want some priorities which are about getting across the basic issues to people at a local level. Helping local groups to communicate on the doorstep about the immorality and uselessness of nuclear weapons and the case for unilateralism.

Greenham has almost disappeared from the media now. Is there any sense in which CND or you yourself would like to see it all quietly disappear because it isn't any longer a focus for mass activity?

There may be people who would like it to disappear. But I think it would be the ultimate triumph for the Thatcher government to rid Greenham Common of the women. It's very important to sustain a presence at Greenham, though it doesn't have to be a mass presence any more. The challenge to the Government is the fact that Greenham cannot be maintained as a secure military base. When Cruise comes out, through the links between the Greenham women and the Cruise watch in which CND is heavily involved, we can maintain our stated position that they will not exercise those missiles in secret. Now the media is clearly not giving the attention to it we would like. But it is still very important that we all know it is continuing and that the Government does not get into a position where it is able to say opposition has ceased.

How worried are you about the different competing political groups within CND?

I am much less worried now than I was some time ago. We had a number of struggles within CND that in my view were essentially sectarian.

Give me an example of one or two.

I think the controversy that surrounded the operations of YCND and indeed Labour CND were linked to sectarianism. But the broad based nature of the campaign asserted itself in the face of those difficulties, albeit very cautiously and in a very concerned way because once you have struggled to build an organisation it's very difficult for people not directly involved to know quite who to trust and what is going on. I think we have come through a period of some difficulty, though it never truly threatened the unity of CND itself, it was counter productive in terms of our effectiveness.

Speaking to you now as a Labour Party activist as well, what do you see as being the best possible option for the Labour Party in the next few years and what are your worst fears about what might happen in the Labour Party?

The best situation, from CND's point of view, would be if the Labour Party took a decision that they needed to popularise the defence policy which they have adopted, that they started to campaign vigorously at every opportunity and that they had a massive programme of education within their own organisation, and they tried to prepare themselves for fighting another general election where I am absolutely convinced defence and disarmament will be at the top of the agenda. The election is not going to be fought on the grounds that the Labour Party chooses. It will be fought on whatever grounds the Tories choose, because they are still likely to be in a much more powerful position. Moreover, if that kind of realisation was there, it would probably be helpful in terms of other aspects of Labour Party policy because they would



there is no place in the electoral system for a CND-type party

be creating a certain moral ground which does link with choices about the kind of society we want. It is possible to make very strong links with the health service and the cuts and everything like that. They could perhaps gain from the way in which CND has captured that ground - life rather than death. So that would be the best case. The worst case would be that it's just more of the same, the fact that we hear Denis Healey speaking out again suggesting it would be impossible to get rid of American bases without consultation, all that kind of shilly-shallying. If the only thing that really surfaces between now and the next election is a debate about the minimum demand, with no attempt to win the fundamental case and no attempt to develop the non-nuclear strategy, then that would clearly be the worst case and ensure losing the next election.

There is a very crucial debate on the Left in which some people, to put it extremely crudely, will look back on the last ten years and say it's been very dire, we've seen the Left shrinking and becoming more impoverished, and the Left is only going to survive if people sit up and recognise how weak it is. And on, the other side people have said, nonsense the

Left has gone from strength to strength, look at CND for example. What do you feel about that general argument?

From the 60s onwards, new radical forces have been developing, much of it in pressure groups, culminating in the biggest one which is CND. That has constantly drawn people away from the Left in organisational terms, away from the trade unions, from the Labour Party, or at least has divided their time and interest. They've found it easier to develop their political enthusiasm in other groups than in the labour movement. In my view, not enough effort was made soon enough to change the kind of dead-handed bureaucracy and the hopelessness that existed within so many parts of the labour movement. By the time people decided that what was needed was really radical change in the Labour Party, a lot of ground, opportunity, time and people had been lost. And all that was seen to be happening then was a struggle about the rules and all that. Perhaps it is now possible that the people who have been spread out across all these radical movements and CND could be attracted into the labour movement, or at least brought into some kind of coalition with the labour movement, if the labour movement wants it, and is reaching out for this. But I don't think that is really happening. There are people within who are trying to make it happen, but it's very difficult for lots of people who are in the peace movement to find any connection with the local Labour Party or with their local trade union branch. Indeed when they try to go and talk with their local Labour Party or trade union branch they often find it quite difficult.

Would it be true to say that many of the people who are difficult to communicate with in the labour movement are on the Left?

That's right. There are some people on the Left who clearly feel that the Left should be concerned about class issues more than anything else, that there is a class war to be fought and won. They are not, as I see it, recognising that although in terms of British society there is indeed a class problem, a lot of the people in these other movements don't have that analysis.

To what extent did CND become the great attraction for radically-minded people because, out of all the available causes, it had the most appeal for women. For some time, many women had been seeking an entry into politics and they were peculiarly alienated not only by, if you like, certain dogmatic expressions of class politics, but particularly by bureaucracy and certain forms of discipline and rule making . . .

And, outright chauvinism. If CND had not had such a huge spontaneous flow of women into the movement in such numbers then obviously it would have been a different movement. There would still have been - a movement for all the reasons we spoke about, the time was right and the issue was there, not just in this country but throughout the world. But there are peace movements in other parts of the world - the Japanese peace movement is a very good example - which are heavily male dominated, so it's not true that women made the peace movement possible, but there wouldn't be a peace movement with the character that it has.

As a member of the Labour Party and leading figure within CND, what is your view of the Communist Party and its role in CND?

I do recognise that it has played a role which is distinctive and useful. Within the peace movement the Communist Party has a very good record. Its members have participated on the basis of

maintaining a very broad base; it's campaigned by and large on an entirely non-sectarian basis. There are some signs now of individuals acting in what I would term a sectarian way, but most Communist Party members have, I think, given tremendous assistance to the development of the peace movement, because Communists are among the very few people who actually do work at political analysis and education, so are much more able and interested to inform themselves about the arms race and convey that to others.

In West Germany there's been phenomenal growth of the Greens in a roughly similar period and covering some of the issues that CND has taken up, and appears to have succeeded for some of the same reasons as CND - attracting young people who have rejected conventional parties, being much stronger on feminism, women and a critique of industrialism than is true of the Labour Party or social democratic parties. To what extent do you think CND's general values are ecologically linked?

It's difficult to answer because people to some extent make of CND what they want to make of it. We do have policies which relate to environmental questions but certainly not to industrialisation. There is pressure within the movement from some in Green CND to make CND more comprehensively green and that is a continuing tension. We have adopted some policies that are entirely acceptable to people in green politics, but we haven't got a green programme.

If the political parties of the Left fail to regenerate themselves, and CND does manage to sustain itself, are there not going to be increasing pressures inside CND for it to develop a more comprehensive set of values?

If we get into that situation then I think CND will ultimately become ineffective because we cannot be a political party, we cannot have a programme which is comprehensive. There is no place in the electoral system for a CND-type party to have any possibility of gaining any power. So what you would do, by trying to adopt more and more policies about more and more issues, is reduce the broad base of CND, reduce the number of people who will be prepared to continue as members and enormously increase the frustration. Because if you've no way of achieving your programme then ultimately people will become dissatisfied. Personally I have always been convinced that the task is to build a constituency for peace, for disarmament, for removal of nuclear weapons and the issues which relate directly to achieving that, which are about foreign policies.

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