

**CND has displayed great resilience. But the next election is on the horizon, and the last one did the peace movement no good at all.**

# THE CASE FOR THE DEFENCE

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HAS THE PEACE MOVEMENT learned the lessons of the 1983 general election? There has been little analysis of what happened. There has been no attempt to date to draw up a coherent strategy for the peace movement's intervention in the next election, now nudging its way over the political horizon. Time is getting short, but most peace activists continue to neglect the wider questions raised by electoral politics in favour of campaigning against new weapons systems.

As a movement of resistance to cruise the peace movement has shown remarkable resilience. The arrival of the first flight of cruise missiles at Greenham Common in November 1983 marked a critical defeat for the new mass movement, which owed its very existence to the belief that cruise deployment could be prevented. And yet, today, the anti-cruise campaign is more vigorous than ever. The Greenham women are still there, still breaking into the base, still defying eviction. 'Cruise-watch', a network of peace activists throughout southern England, has achieved its goal of preventing cruise convoys from 'melting into the countryside'. Every one is tracked, showing that cruise cannot be hidden from Russian targetters or, more important, the British public. At Molesworth peace campers and the Pledge campaign succeeded in forcing Michael Heseltine's invasion. In a single night the Ministry of Defence spent £1,000,000 erecting an emergency fence - £1m worth of favourable publicity for CND. The coming months are likely to show that the peace movement's presence around Molesworth will be just as persistent as at Greenham.

Since 1983 CND has devoted more attention to Trident. Last October's Barrow demonstration will be followed up with a nationally co-ordinated campaign of petitioning and street ballots during April and May. It may be that CND is pushing at a half-open door. The rise and rise of the dollar is a powerful ally in the fight against Trident, and there are other allies in strange places.

These weapons-orientated campaigns have been sufficient to sustain CND's momentum. National membership continues to grow vigorously, rising from

75,000 in 1983 to 110,000 today. Resilience, yes. But the movement still has no answer to the only question that really matters. How is it going to win majority opinion for unilateral nuclear disarmament?

## The 1983 debacle

In June 1983 unilateralism made a significant contribution to the collapse of the Labour vote. The outcome of the election was not determined by the nuclear issue: other factors, notably the fragmentation of the anti-Tory vote, were decisive. Nevertheless, CND and Mrs Thatcher between them made defence a much more important issue than in previous elections. And it worked against the Left. Had the voters perceived the nuclear issue as a choice between escalation and the *status quo*, then

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most of them would have supported the latter. The polls showed comfortable majorities against cruise and Trident. But the Conservatives understood that. So they said very little about the new weapons systems. Instead they homed in on the question of complete 'one-sided'-English for 'uni-lateraF - nuclear disarmament by Britain. Cruise and Trident were turned into marginal issues compared with the larger question - and on this it was the Tories who struck the popular note: Britain needs its bomb. Time and again

Labour deserters explained to canvassers: 'but you would leave us defenceless'.

Certainly the Labour Party handled the issue badly. Little was done before the election to popularise its new defence policy. Labour candidates were often badly informed about the arguments. Squabbling leaders muddied the waters over Polaris. But the real problem lay deeper. Despite all the activities of the peace movement since 1979 little progress had been made towards winning majority support for unilateralism. A poll conducted at the time of the election showed a mere 17% support for the view that 'Britain should get rid of its own nuclear weapons, irrespective of what other countries do'. Other polls have shown higher figures. But what matters is the number of *convinced* unilateralists, people who can withstand the pro-nuclear propaganda of an election campaign. It is probable that, however Labour had conducted the election, the nuclear issue would have lost them votes.

The lesson of June 1983 is that no amount of mobilisation against particular weapons systems will enable the peace movement to turn the nuclear issue into an electoral liability for the Tories. If the movement continues during the next two years to do little more than campaign against escalation it will end up in the next election exactly where it was in June 1983. Popular opposition to cruise and Trident will, once again, be outflanked by the argument over nuclear 'defence' as such. Until the peace movement and its allies can win the larger argument, popular majorities against specific new deployments will remain of marginal significance in electoral politics.

## Non-nuclear defence

The only way out of this situation is to tackle the argument of 'defencelessness' head on. Most people believe that Britain does need to be defended. This is not because they expect the Russians to invade tomorrow. Many people have no clear idea what or whom it is we need to defend ourselves against. It may be that popular support for 'defence' has more to do with definitions of nationhood than with perceptions of any particular 'enemy'. If so explaining that the Russians are not coming will not, in itself, assuage the popular

demand for 'defence'. The enemy can change. Only the nation is immutable. So long as nationalism continues to be a powerful political force, most people will have to be convinced that Britain *can* be defended without nuclear weapons before they will accept unilateralism. The anti-cruise campaign has been popular because it connects with nationalism. But CND's unilateralist case has usually been posed in a language of high-minded self-sacrifice, of

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turning the other cheek - we should 'give up' our nuclear weapons no matter what anyone else does. The constituencies that can be mobilised with such language have already been mobilised. So long as the peace movement campaigns simply *against* nuclear weapons it will remain vulnerable to the charge that nuclear disarmament would leave Britain defenceless. If unilateralism is ever to appeal to more than a 'moral minority', it must find a way of engaging with popular belief in the need for defence.

Is it unrealistic to set ourselves the goal of winning majority support for non-nuclear defence during the next two years? The same June 1983 poll which found 17% support for unilateralism also asked

whether Britain should 'base its defence on a strong conventional army, navy and airforce without any nuclear weapons'? 42% said yes. CND-commissioned polls found 36% (in September 1983) and 50% (in May 1984) opposed to a defence policy based on the possible use of nuclear weapons. Unilateralism, as such, may have made little headway. But the public furore over new nuclear weapons since 1979 does seem to have fundamentally weakened popular confidence in the rationality of current defence policies.

A variety of authoritative voices now support the case for non-nuclear defence. The 1984 Liberal Party Assembly committed the party to the long term aim of creating a non-nuclear defence structure in Europe. This has an importance beyond Liberal politics: it helps to rescue the Labour Party from its political isolation on the subject. Denis Healey argues the case forcefully, lending an authority derived from decades of Atlanticist loyalty to the Labour Party's new defence strategy. Many academic strategists and military analysts have moved in the same direction. Just Defence and the Alternative Defence Commission have begun to explore the alternatives. What should the peace movement do to consolidate this trend of opinion?

It may be that a new national initiative is needed, undertaken by a new national organisation. This would not be a membership organisation but an *ad hoc* committee including leading members of peace

movement organisations, churches, trade unions, political parties, etc. The committee would draw up a 'Defence Charter' designed to set the agenda for the defence debate in the next general election. Such a Charter would urge the next British government to move towards a non-nuclear and less provocative defence policy. As a first step it would demand the repatriation of cruise missiles and the cancellation of Trident. The Charter might also lay down, as a long-term goal, the mutual dissolution of NATO and the Warsaw Pact, and the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Europe. Beyond that it would not attempt to elaborate any specific defence policy.

Such a platform would leave aside many questions. How much, beyond the removal of cruise and the cancellation of Trident, should any new government aim to achieve during its first term of office? Should Polaris be scrapped forthwith or retained until the end of its useful life? Should there be negotiations with the Americans about their nuclear bases in Britain? What proportion of GNP should Britain devote to armaments? What kind of approach should be adopted to arms conversion? How should a non-nuclear Britain relate to NATO, while it continues to exist? Should Britain adopt a policy of territorial defence, or should British forces remain in Germany?

These omissions are deliberate. The point is not to find agreement on every issue, but to consolidate public understanding of one simple proposition: 'Britain *can* be defended without nuclear weapons.' To the extent that this is accepted, the Tories' most devastating election cry of 1983 - 'But you would leave us defenceless' - will have been neutralised.

#### New terms of debate

For a year or eighteen months before the next election the Defence Charter would become a central campaigning tool for the peace movement and its allies. Tens of millions of signatures would be collected. Chartist meetings would be held, addressed by supporters from all parts of the political spectrum. Television pundits would debate the questions opened up by the Charter. Every participant in the defence debate would have to define his or her position in relation to the Charter. By the time the election came the terms of the discussion would have been set - not nuclear deterrence *versus* defencelessness (as in 1983), but nuclear escalation *versus* non-nuclear defence.

A campaign of the kind described could





not happen unless it received the enthusiastic support of the peace movement in general, and of CND in particular. How likely is it - or anything like it - to get that support?

There are those who believe that non-nuclear defence is a blind alley for the peace movement. Peace activists cannot be expected to enthuse over different ways of killing people. Any campaign for non-nuclear defence would split the movement, dividing the pacifists from those who were prepared to settle for the lesser evil. This is an ill-considered response. It is clear that the world is not going to move overnight from provocative over-armament to general and complete disarmament. Disarmament will be a process. Defence policies based on conventional weapons will be a stage on that road. Moreover, any superpower conflict in Europe would sooner or later become a nuclear war, even if there were no nuclear weapons in the continent. Even the Second World War went nuclear in the end. You *cannot* disinvent nuclear weapons. Therefore you have to disinvent war. The non-nuclear defence discussion is not about rehabilitating war fighting at lower levels of destruction. It is about developing defence postures and foreign policies that minimise the risk of war breaking out.

The maintenance of peace should be the first objective of any genuine defence policy. Today, however, it is the so-called

'defence' policies of the nuclear powers that constitute the main threat to peace. Moving Britain towards a non-nuclear and less provocative defence policy would do something to make the world a slightly safer place. It would, however, be a beginning, not the end of the process. It would open the way for a constructive foreign policy premised on the belief that no nation can enhance its own security by threatening the security of others. Britain could begin to find a new role in world affairs, a positive and constructive role in relation to both East/West and North/South problems. There is no reason why pacifists could not support a Defence Charter, not as a satisfactory resting place, but as a stage in the process of dismantling the nuclear confrontation.

I am not arguing that the peace movement should adopt a *particular* non-nuclear defence policy. It is the job of political parties, which set themselves up as alternative governments, to elaborate detailed policy. And this is now occurring, at least within the Labour Party. It is one thing to elaborate policy, however, and quite a different thing to campaign for it. Given the experience of June 1983 Labour Party leaders will not be eager to place the nuclear issue at the centre of their election campaign. At the moment it is clear that Labour approaches its own defence policy in a spirit of damage-limitation rather than of evangelical fervour. Despite the leading

role played by the Labour Party in the early stages of the revival of the peace movement, the party has, at present, no intention of launching a public campaign around defence issues. Similarly the leadership of the Liberal Party believes that it can get most votes by putting as much distance as possible between itself and the nuclear disarmament policies supported by Liberal activists and the Liberal Assembly.

### The Freeze option

Before politicians can be expected to promote non-nuclear defence in the election they must first be convinced that there are votes to be won by so doing. Of course it is important to press the Labour Party not to wait until the election is upon it, but to campaign now to popularise its defence policy. But, given the record of the Labour Party as an extra-parliamentary campaigning organisation, it would be foolish to expect too much even if it did decide to take a lead on this question. Non-nuclear defence will move to the centre of electoral politics only to the extent that the peace movement pushes it there - and that means demonstrating the existence of majority support among the general public. If the peace movement fails to take this on, choosing to concentrate simply on opposing particular weapons, the most likely response will be that Labour politicians try to duck the nuclear issue altogether, as they did during the final stages of the 1983 election. The fact that Mrs Thatcher is no more likely to let them get away with this than she did in 1983 offers little comfort.

There are those, particularly on the Labour Left, who object that for the peace movement to put energy into such a campaign would compromise its commitment to unilateralism. Adopting a non-nuclear defence policy is, of course, the same thing as unilateral nuclear disarmament. The point at issue is that the proposed Defence Charter does not seek any commitment to *immediate* complete denuclearisation (beyond removing cruise and stopping Trident). It is clear that, in the internal life of the Labour Party, such a Charter could be used by those wishing to wriggle out of commitments already undertaken. This would be a valid objection if the 'Defence Charter' were offered as a means of consolidating opinion inside the Labour Party. It is not. Rather it is intended to open a dialogue between the aims of both CND and the Labour Party and the broad mass of the public. But dialogue is, inescapably, a two-way process. Building bridges into the 'centre ground' inevitably contains the

risk that some people will try to cross in the wrong direction, from left to right. When they do, the appropriate response is not to blow up the bridge, but to mobilise such a crowd moving from right to left that the trimmers have no choice but to turn around. The value of building the particular bridge proposed here is that it offers a way of carrying the unilateralist argument beyond the 'moral minority' who are already convinced. Far from marking a retreat from unilateralism, the Defence Charter provides a way of winning majority support for it.

There is a different current of thought represented in the peace movement which looks to the demand for a nuclear Freeze to serve the same kind of bridge-building function as is proposed here for the 'Defence Charter'. Proposals to open the way for genuine disarmament talks by agreeing a worldwide freeze of nuclear deployments, testing and research certainly have majority support. But it is doubtful how far this can help CND. By pinning progress towards disarmament on international agreement, the Freeze tends to undercut demands for unilateral action. And the mechanical addition of a unilateral British Freeze to the established multilateralist position does little to improve the position. Whereas a campaign around non-nuclear defence opens the way for the full unilateralist case, a campaign around an independent British Freeze tends to hold the line for a 'reasonable' - and entirely illusory - policy of nuclear deterrence without escalation. There is already majority support for maintaining the *status quo*: that is what the Government appealed to, dishonestly but to great effect, in June 1983.

If the Labour Party was not already committed to non-nuclear defence then it might be desirable (as in the United States) to concentrate on exposing the hypocrisy of the Government's claim to represent a nuclear *status quo*, and seek to consolidate anti-nuclear opinion around the Freeze. But in the existing political situation too much emphasis on the Freeze could be positively unhelpful. In party political terms the difference between the Freeze and the Defence Charter is that while the former tends to draw a line *around* the SDP-Liberal Alliance, the latter tends to draw a line *within* it - as at present constituted. The goal of non-nuclear defence can unite Labour and Liberal opinion and isolate Owen and Thatcher. The Freeze establishes a centrist position that marks Owen and Steel off from both Thatcher (escalation) and Kinnock (un-

ilateralism). Far from opening up a bridge between unilateralism and the centre ground, the Freeze therefore works in practice to erect a fence. This was strikingly illustrated at the Liberal Assembly last September when David Steel tried to use it to 'freeze in' cruise - a manoeuvre brilliantly thwarted by Paddy Ashdown.

### Politics of resistance

A rather different objection to the Defence Charter comes from those who see it as a distraction from the primary job of organising extra-parliamentary resistance to nuclear weapons. The 'politics of resistance' are, indeed, fundamental to the prospects of the peace movement. Direct action has done much to force the nuclear issue onto the political agenda and to keep it there. Non-violent resistance plays an important part in exposing the unacceptably authoritarian face of Thatcherism. The expense and potential political cost of policing the growing ranks of resisters to every unfenced outcrop of the nuclear state - and some of the fenced ones too - will no doubt play a deterrent role in future decisions about weapons deployments. Moreover, the peace movement's 'politics of resistance' have provided a forcing house for ideas of radical social change. At a time when traditional labourist and socialist politics are in such very deep crisis, it would be unwise to underestimate the contribution that the less orthodox parts of the peace movement may have to make to the future of radical politics.

## long before the revolution is complete. . . we must buy time for humanity

One secret of CND's success to date - MI5 please note - has lain in its ability to hold together this 'politics of resistance' with a concern to use those democratic channels that exist, and, in particular, to communicate with and persuade the majority of citizens. This has rested less on a process of alliance between 'resisters' and 'persuaders', than on the fact that large numbers of activists have found the time and the breadth of political imagination to engage in both kinds of activity. One reason for this unusual combination of extremism and moderation may be found in the nature of the issue itself. Those who have tried to face the full implications of the nuclear threat have learned two, complementary, lessons. On the one hand, only through the most far-reaching and

many-sided social revolution will humanity discover an alternative to self-annihilation. On the other hand, the supreme urgency of the situation demands that no one permits their pursuit of ultimate social transformations to stand in the way of securing even the most modest step back from the brink. Human survival requires that human beings learn to share the resources of the planet in radically new ways. But long before the revolution is complete - now, when it is scarcely begun - we must buy time for humanity: and that means engaging with the structures of power as they presently exist.

The Defence Charter definitely belongs in the 'buying time' sector of peace movement activity. That need not mean that it is incapable of arousing the enthusiasm of the whole movement. One of the - widely acknowledged - weaknesses of direct action is that it tends to become merely reactive. However far-reaching the goals of the activists, there is a logic to resistance which allows the armourers to set the terms of the argument. The convoys go out, so the convoys must be tracked. The fence goes up, so the fence must come down. Nothing wrong in that, nor in doing it with all the courage and ingenuity at one's command. But in the excitement of the immediate battle of wits, the larger argument tends to go by default. The Defence Charter offers a way of conducting the larger argument on our own terms. It is complementary to the 'politics of resistance', not in competition with them.

The peace movement has an unprecedented opportunity to break through into majority opinion. To grasp that opportunity it needs to rethink its campaigning methods. Non-nuclear defence is the issue. Something like the Defence Charter proposed here is the means. But time is now short. One lesson CND learned in 1983 was that the peace movement cannot expect to have any significant influence once an election campaign is under way. During elections politics belongs to the parties - and they have laws to protect their monopoly.

If a tide of opinion in favour of non-nuclear defence is going to have an impact on the election of 1987/88, then it will have to be mobilised very soon. There is no doubt that single weapons issue campaigning is the line of least resistance for the peace movement. Will the movement follow its nose into a repeat performance of June 1983? Or will it rise to the occasion and launch a bold new initiative? Either deliberately, or by default, that decision will be taken during the next few months.