

Jane Taylor is a conscientious objector

## The Last March

Ever since I can remember I have been going on demonstrations. But not this time. I am a conscientious objector. I will not march with the Committee to Stop War in the Gulf. I expect people stop demonstrating for all sorts of reasons: age, infirmity clashing responsibilities, or sheer apathy. But also politics.

Ironically, my immediate reaction to the outbreak of war was to fling myself in my imagination into the Royal Ascot of all demos, Vietnam. As a reference point in popular protest it's pretty powerful, Vietnam. Even those of us too young to have been part of it are still under the spell of the culture of activism formed around it.

But my kneejerk resolve faded. I absented myself from a couple of demos. And was glad I did. Because al-

though I feel passionately about the Gulf war - how unnecessary it was, how obscene its prosecution is, how devastating its outcome may yet be - I know that my opposition would be diminished, subverted even, by marching with the Committee to Stop War in the Gulf.

I have two political objections. Firstly, I object to the bite-sized, stick-on solutions being peddled by the Committee. 'America out of the Gulf!' - Sure. 'Saddam out of Kuwait!' - Yes. 'Immediate ceasefire!' - Eh? 'Stop War!' - No. No, this is not reality. At best, it is naive. At worst, it is placebo politics, selling a deceit to make people feel better. I do not want to stand up and be counted as a supporter of those demands.

Secondly, I object to the marching. I can imagine nothing less likely to be an empowering experience. I shudder at the recollection of those long, cold hours standing around followed by long, deserted routes where the only struggle is you versus the wind, trying to keep the banner upright. And I am no longer prepared to put up with the various parasitical fringe groups, ranging from the self-importantly irrelevant to the downright obnoxious, who are an unchanging part of the demo scene.

Much as CND may distance itself from these groups, its rhetoric and practice of opposition is an open invitation for their malign political presence. Others may be perfectly sanguine about such bedfellows, personally, I would like to be able to choose another form of political participation. None is on offer.

I bet I am not the only stay-away. The Gulf conflict is particularly ill-suited to the traditional left culture of opposition, which relies on being able to mark out ideological ground in antagonism to the prevailing consensus and then trying to win converts. So much the better if the odds are very heavily stacked against you, or if the consensus involves jingoistic patriotism, the use of armed force, or is pro-

American - all points of ambivalence for the left.

Yet the political and moral certainties of the old polarities have dissolved. The Gulf conflict is a messy, complex affair, to which the most natural response is for people to shake their heads and confess to not knowing the answers. Would that CND had the courage to say so. Or that some of our national politicians were allowed to say so. For as much as I reject the demo mentality, I also despair at the apolitical bipartisanship of our national mainstream parties.

Throughout this conflict I have felt largely unrepresented. If I had to nominate those politicians whose views I most trusted, who have most clearly articulated my own fluid, contingent thoughts on the crisis as it developed, I would opt for two pensionable septuagenarians, both of whom I despised in their political heyday: Denis Healey, who sold the Labour government to the IMF, and Ted Heath, who became the Tories' lamest duck of all. Yet here we are, Denis and Ted and I, and countless nameless others, out in the political wilderness.

Still, at least I know what those two are thinking. That is more than I can say about the Liberal Democrats, who seem to be headed for their own Westminster bunker *en masse*, or for Robin Cook, Clare Short, John Prescott or Chris Smith - all of whose views I would in normal times respect and follow with interest. Despite the fact that all are senior and serious Labour figures, since we have been at war, they have been either confined to briefs or otherwise disciplined.

It's indicative of that enfeebled culture of opposition that Labour's insecurity prevents intelligent and thoughtful politicians from airing their reservations and doubts in public. *People* know that the Gulf crisis is troubling and contradictory. Why on earth should we be surprised or aggrieved if politicians find it that way too? To acknowledge those differences is not a sign of weakness. But to make political

sense out of doubt and qualification demands a higher quality of debate, analysis and representation than the old conviction politics. A handful of commentators and politicians are trying hard to produce that. Their writings and comments have a confessional tone, and no wonder. They are stepping over the invisible, moralistic Maginot Line of the old culture of opposition.

I, too, want no more part of it. I want instead a humane, moral, critical and intelligent, culture of dissent, which would deploy political energies in very different ways. I can't prescribe what that culture of dissent would be. I can most clearly explain it in terms of the absences of thinking and doing.

There's the lack of national political debate which raises the tough, awkward questions that will act as restraints upon those controlling the conflict, and could set the tone for the longer-run peace. There's the absence of serious consideration, beyond a handful of wary churchmen, of who bears moral responsibility for the creation that is Saddam Hussein.

Where are the networks to support and give refuge to those Arabs, long resident in this country, who, like Abbas Shiblak, are now illegally threatened with deportation? Who is pressuring our schools into tackling the ugly spin-off of the war into anti-Muslim playground racism in our inner-cities?

We should have produced campaigns by now to identify and bring to justice the inevitable sanctions-busters. I can recall no initiatives from the myriad environment and energy groups about seizing the opportunity to force the pace on alternative energy policies. No one has asked me to contribute material aid for Iraqi civilians who have lost everything in the allied bombing.

But I have been asked to give blood. It was in a news bulletin, just after the war broke, and it seemed an entirely practical, positive, useful thing to do. So I am going to do it.

