

Refusing to pay for war

Gayle Kinead

‘... There has been a steady decline in my certainty that we are doing the right thing replacing Trident. Nuclear deterrence does not provide the certainty that it seemed to in the past. It’s not an insurance policy. It’s a potential booby trap.’

*James Arbuthnot MP
Chairman,
Defence Select Committee
The Guardian, 15.12.13*

The author is Conscience’s campaigns and communications officer.

Former Conservative Defence Minister James Arbuthnot recently stated that his views are changing over the replacement of the UK’s nuclear deterrent, Trident. He questioned the usefulness of Trident as a deterrent and whether or not the UK could afford the nuclear weapon programme. He also pointed out that there was a growing divide between the military and the people they serve. I would extend this to include the UK’s current political leadership on one side and the general public on the other. This divide can most clearly be seen in the parliamentary vote on Syria. People are moving away from the belief that paying for war and weapons provides the best form of security.

The tide is turning. Conscience has been campaigning to push forward change on defence for the past 30 years. The aims of *Conscience* are twofold. We campaign on behalf of conscientious objectors to military taxation and for an increase in the amount of UK tax spent on non-violent, non-military security solutions, and a decrease in the amount spent on war and the preparation for war.

Peace Tax – beyond hypothecation

Conscientious objectors to military taxation believe that though we no longer face military conscription in the UK, we continue to bear a moral responsibility for war through our taxation contribution. *Conscience* campaigns for an update in the law, so that people with a conscientious objection to war can have the part of their taxes currently spent on war and its preparations spent on non-violent, non-military forms of security instead. This

process is known as Peace Tax.

Many confuse our aims with hypothecation. Hypothecation is the process of assigning tax revenues to a specific end. *Conscience* does not advocate a change in the amount spent on security and defence – we believe there are alternative and far more effective (and economical) ways of providing national security which do not require our taxes being used as a tool to fund conflict.

A common argument used against *Conscience's* aim is that if conscientious objectors won the right to divert taxes away from military expenditure, a range of other groups and individuals would demand a similar right; for example, to divert their taxes away from paying for state education, new roads, or the National Health Service. Essentially, the floodgates would open to others calling for a similar right. However, the Peace Tax case is different to others for a number of reasons. The major difference is that the military intentionally kill and harm people as part of their role. No other area of government spending does so. Secondly, the desire not to contribute to state education or road building via taxes is a political objection, not one based on conscience.

Finally, objections driven by conscience have a legislative precedent. Conscientious objection to military service was first recognised in the Military Service Act 1916. This Act introduced military conscription for the majority, but also recognised the rights of a minority not to be complicit in killing, thus establishing the right to conscientious objection. At this time a form of 'alternative service' was available to some conscientious objectors, for example, working in an ambulance service. The choice of alternative service is not available to present day conscientious objectors, who are required to pay for the military regardless of matters of conscience. We are asking for a new form of alternative service: one that allows conscientious objectors to pay the military part of their taxes to a non-military fund and thus provide a means by which conscientious objectors can contribute to security and safety in good conscience.

Peace Tax provides for a conscientiously acceptable – and more effective and efficient – alternative, and it has no negative impact on the government's job of providing security for the nation as a whole.

'Meet the Real Peacebuilders'

Conscience campaigns for a progressive increase in the amount of UK tax spent on non-violent, non-military security solutions, and a corresponding decrease in the amount spent on war and preparations for war. In addition,

we advocate the use of non-military security solutions, and provide information and resources to support the development of peace-building, conflict prevention and transformation methods. These methods are widely recognised as providing more effective security, and affording better value for money, than military intervention.

Conscience is currently showcasing the work of non-violent peace-builders. Through our ‘Meet the Real Peacebuilders’ campaign, we introduce those who work within conflict prevention and transformation from across the globe to our supporters and the wider public. We highlight the work carried out by these individuals and organisations to show decision makers that there are viable alternatives which make it possible to secure peace through non-military means. It is these security measures we want our taxes to go towards.

We specifically campaign for the development of the British Government’s inter-departmental Conflict Pool, which funds peacebuilding activities. The Conflict Pool funds conflict prevention, stabilisation and peacekeeping activities to reduce the number of people around the world whose lives are affected by violent conflict. Established in 2009, it was primarily designed to prevent, manage, and resolve regional and international conflicts, as well as to create conditions amenable to effective state building and economic development.

The Conflict Pool is not yet a means through which we can pay Peace Tax. However, it is the closest such entity created by government so far. Unfortunately, the Conflict Pool is not perfect. It is commonly used as a source of funds to cover any overspend on military peacekeeping operations. In addition, there is a disturbing lack of transparency with some of the projects funded by the Pool. Indeed, changes coming into force in 2015 may lead to greater militarisation of the Pool.

Conscience campaigns to remedy these problems and, in time, increase the amount of security spending that goes towards the Conflict Pool while decreasing the amount that goes towards the military. We want the Conflict Pool to be used solely for non-military conflict prevention and peacebuilding projects. Therefore, we are calling on government to make the Pool more transparent, stop its use as a Ministry of Defence slush fund, and put an immediate halt to any creeping militarisation.

CONSCIENCE – TAXES FOR PEACE NOT WAR

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