



Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament 60th Anniversary

NOW MORE THAN EVER

*Greetings and best wishes from the
Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation*

The Beginning

CND 1958-65

Peggy Duff

Peggy Duff was the first secretary of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. This excerpt is from Left, Left, Left: A personal account of six protest campaigns 1945-65.

Since atomic weapons were first used in 1945 it is odd that there was no big campaign against them until 1957. There had been one earlier attempt at a campaign, in 1954, when Britain was proceeding to make her own H-Bombs. Fourteen years later, Anthony Wedgwood Benn, who was one who led the Anti H-Bomb Petition then, was refusing the CND Aldermaston marchers permission to stop and hold a meeting on ministry land, outside the factory near Burghfield, Berks, making warheads for Polaris submarine missiles. *Autres temps, autres moeurs.*

There were two reasons why it suddenly zoomed up in 1957. The first stimulus was the H-Bomb tests at Christmas Island in the Pacific. It was these that translated the committee formed in Hampstead in North London into a national campaign, and which brought into being a number of local committees around Britain which pre-dated CND itself — in Oxford, in Reading, in Kings Lynn and a number of other places. Tests were a constant and very present reminder of the menace of nuclear weapons, affecting especially the health of children, and of babies yet unborn. Fall-out seemed something uncanny, unseen and frightening. The Christmas Island tests, because they were British tests, at last roused opinion in Britain.

The second reason was the failure of the Labour Party in the autumn of 1957 to pass, as expected, a resolution in favour of unilateral abandonment of nuclear weapons by Britain. Then, and for many years after, a great many people saw the Labour Party as the only road to ban the British bomb. First, you had to change Labour Party

policy. Then you had to get Labour elected. It sounded quite simple, but even in 1957 something went wrong.

The resolution, composited from sixty-six calling for unilateral renunciation of H-weapons by Britain, was moved by Harold Davies and seconded by Vivienne Mendelsohn from Norwood Labour Party. The story goes that Harold came out of the compositing meeting and told his waiting friends that a nice little blonde girl from South London was to second the motion. They asked her name. Then they told him gently that the nice little blonde girl was the most militant Trotskyist in the Labour Party.

But that was not why the resolution was defeated. Basically, the reason was Nye Bevan. He was then shadow foreign minister and he called, on behalf of the NEC, for the rejection of Harold's resolution. It is said that he tried, before the debate, to persuade the movers to moderate it, probably to opposition to a first use of nuclear weapons which remained his position. He failed. So, on behalf of the powers-that-be, he defended the British bomb and pleaded with delegates not to send him naked into the conference chamber. Since at that stage the communist-dominated unions (represented, of course, by Labour Party members, but putting the CP point of view) opposed unilateral action on the bomb, Nye was bound to win. He did — by 5,836,000 to 781,000. Quite a victory.

The effect on the left was devastating. Nevertheless, in spite of the size of his victory, perhaps because of it, opposition to the British bomb soared steadily.

By that time I was working for the National Council for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapon Tests, as organizer. The chairman was a Quaker, Arthur Goss, owner of the *Hampstead and Highgate Express*, an excellent newspaper known locally as the *Ham and Hi*. He was a committed pacifist and persistently maintained throughout that summer and autumn that a movement so important ought to be run by important, national figures. He was modest and did not rank himself as such but, in their absence, he and his committee did everything they could. The secretary was Sheila Jones and other members included a number of Quakers, Gertrude Fishwick, Peggy Darvell, Rex Phillips from Orpington, also Nell McGregor, a Labour Party member from Hampstead Garden Suburb, and Sidney Hilton, a scientist, and Ianthe Carswell. One observer at their meetings was a certain Mr David Ennals, then working for UNA, who afterwards became a junior minister at the War Office.

When I first started working for the National Campaign it was operated from a long trestle table in Sheila Jones's sitting-room in Well Road in Hampstead. Daily, I plodded up East Heath Road and there we organized

meetings and marches, sent out names of MPs to be written to, collected names of sponsors and money, while her children played around the room and practised the piano. It looked very amateur, but wasn't.

Then we moved to a small office at 29 Great James Street, lent by the National Peace Council. There, when the series of tests at Christmas Island was over, we started to discuss whether the objects of the committee should be widened to include not only the tests but the weapons as well. It seemed illogical to oppose the tests and not the weapons. So, during the early winter, we wrote off to all the sponsors and to the committees which existed asking if they would approve this extension. They all did, except one. Lord Russell had doubts.

During these months, spurred on by the debacle at the Labour Party Conference, a number of intellectuals began to take action. Lord Russell and J. B. Priestley wrote articles in the *New Statesman*, edited then by Kingsley Martin. George Kennan, in the 1957 Reith Lectures 'Russia, the Atom and the West', questioned the whole basis of nuclear strategy, and raised the temperature still higher.

Just as the National Committee was getting ready to extend itself and was moving to larger offices at 146 Fleet Street, there was a meeting at Kingsley Martin's flat in the Adelphi. Those who attended included Lord Russell, J. B. Priestley and his wife, Jacquetta Hawkes, George Kennan, Professor P. M. S. Blackett and Commander Sir Stephen King-Hall.

The meeting decided on two courses of action. Blackett, as always, saw his role behind the scenes, in 'the corridors of power'; so, to a certain extent, did King-Hall. But in addition it was agreed that a mass movement was required. Kingsley Martin, J. B. Priestley and Russell were detailed to this.

During the days that followed Kingsley contacted the offices of the National Committee and heard of their plans to extend their objectives. After a lot of toing and froing it was agreed to invite all the sponsors of the National Committee, plus a number of others known or expected to be interested, to a meeting at Canon Collins's house near St Paul's on 16 January. I remember I spent almost all of the Christmas holiday typing out the letters of invitation which were all top copies. From this meeting it was hoped to launch a new national campaign against nuclear weapons. The National Committee, with a compliance extremely rare in peace movements, was willing to hand over its office, its funds, its files, its organizer, and the meeting it had planned for 17 February at the Central Hall. Arthur Goss, who had said for so long that what was needed was national figures, really meant what he said.

I cannot remember now everybody who attended that famous meeting. It included a very good selection of what Rose Macaulay once called ‘the stage army of the good’, including Rose Macaulay herself, Dr Bell, the Bishop of Chichester, Lord Russell, Michael Foot, James Cameron, Sir Julian Huxley, Sir Richard Acland, Ritchie Calder, General Adam of UNA, and most of those who afterwards served as sponsors or executive committee members.

It was not a difficult meeting. There was no dissension. Everyone agreed that a campaign was needed. The main disagreement was about the name, and after some arguing *Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament* was chosen because it was brief and to the point. But finally some sort of a committee had to be set up. Nothing had been preplanned. Kingsley Martin was in the chair and together, as people talked, we jotted down a list of names together, then put them to the meeting. One or two refused for various reasons. One or two others were added. Lord Russell agreed to be president. The question of a chairman was left for the first meeting of the committee. The committee finally consisted of Canon John Collins, Ritchie Calder, James Cameron, Howard Davies (of UNA), Michael Foot, Arthur Goss, Sheila Jones, Kingsley Martin, J. B. Priestley, and Professor Joseph Rotblat.

The National Committee was thanked for its noble self-sacrifice. Up to that point everything had gone swimmingly. There followed, however, a few death pangs from the old committee. Arthur Goss and Sheila Jones were not very happy about the way in which the committee had been chosen though the meeting had seemed happy enough about that. They were also unhappy about the chairman. After some consultation between Kingsley Martin, J. B. Priestley and me, Canon Collins was suggested and I took him down to the Albany to meet J. B. Priestley whom he did not know. That was the beginning of a beautiful friendship between them which has outlasted their association with the campaign. Arthur Goss and Sheila Jones would have preferred Ritchie Calder, but Ritchie, both then and later, was not willing. The consequence was that the chairman was not elected at the first meeting. At the second meeting, on 28 January, a formal resolution was passed constituting the campaign and its officers. Lord Russell was formally confirmed as president, but the committee also agreed that ‘a good churchman’ be enrolled as president with him. Russell was no doubt good, but certainly no churchman. Nothing was ever done about this and Lord Russell the one and only president CND ever had. I was formally appointed as organizing secretary. Years later, in 1963, I was ‘elevated’ to ‘general secretary’.

But some members of the old National Committee were also not very

happy that Sheila Jones and Arthur Goss should be the only members of the old committee to transfer to the new. The Executive Committee met this problem by agreeing to accept two people, and leaving it to the old committee to decide who they should be. So the final meeting, of the old committee, in the Fleet Street offices, lasted long into the night, mainly because Arthur Goss, a good Quaker, disliked taking votes and wanted a consensus which simply wasn't there. Finally they had to vote. They put Arthur and Sheila on, but asked the new committee to consider adding Nell MacGregor and Sydney Hilton, as co-opted members. The new committee finally lost that proposal having done nothing about it.

Policy was the first problem that faced the new campaign. It was not difficult to select short-term objectives: tests, missile bases, overflights of planes loaded with nuclear weapons. The main problem was that the committee was anxious to keep UNA with them and UNA was scared of too radical a programme. In an effort to woo the UNA, the first policy statement approved and issued for the Central Hall meeting was certainly ambiguous. It was not entirely unilateralist. It was far less tough than the resolution moved by Harold Davies. This is what it said:

The purpose of the campaign is to demand a British initiative to reduce the nuclear peril and to stop the armaments race, if need be by unilateral action by Great Britain. As a first step towards a general disarmament convention, Britain should press for negotiations, at top level, on the following issues:

1. The stopping of all further tests of nuclear weapons;
2. The stopping of the establishment of new missile bases;
3. The securing of the establishment of neutral and nuclear free zones;
4. The securing of the abolition of the manufacture and stockpiling of all nuclear weapons;
5. The prevention of the acquisition of nuclear weapons by other nations.

In order to underline the sincerity of her own initiative, Britain should be prepared to announce that, pending negotiations:

- a. She will suspend patrol flights of aeroplanes equipped with nuclear weapons;
- b. She will make no further tests of hydrogen bombs;
- c. She will not proceed with the establishment of missile bases on her territory;
- d. She will not provide nuclear weapons for any country.

This ghastly hotchpotch of English prose was obviously the work of a committee, and might well have been accepted by Aneurin Bevan. Indeed, until the Central Hall meeting on 17 February, there was nothing very different about the policy of the new Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

The first storm signals were seen in the response to the advertisements for the Central Hall meeting. The speakers were to be Michael Foot, Cdr Sir Stephen King-Hall, J. B. Priestley, Lord Russell and A. J. P. Taylor, with Canon Collins in the chair. The new campaign held a press conference in St Bride's Hall off Fleet Street and got practically no attention at all from the press. But applications for sixpenny tickets for the Central Hall flooded in so fast that with an enthusiasm I had learned from my years with Victor Gollancz, we hired hall after hall for overflow meetings. We finished up with an overflow in Church House, two in Caxton Hall, one other somewhere else nearby which I cannot remember, and the small hall at Central Hall for recordings of the speeches upstairs.

Hurriedly we lined up extra chairmen and speakers. I produced a complicated roster of speakers, moving from one hall to another and a number of guides for the speakers to make sure they got to the right place. Large numbers of stewards and collectors were laid on. Speakers were threatened with excommunication if they spoke over their time – that would have caused chaos in every hall. In fact, they were very well behaved and not one of them sinned.

The size of the response had its effect on the speakers. Faced with mass audiences in five halls, they lost their inhibitions about UNA. One and all came out with a militant denunciation of nuclear weapons, and Britain's in particular. One and all called for unilateral action by Britain. A. J. P. Taylor got the wildest applause when he said that MPs supporting nuclear weapons should be hailed as 'murderers' wherever they appeared in public. From that moment, the campaign was unilateralist. A meeting the following evening for national organizations supporting the new campaign unanimously demanded that unilateral action by Britain in renouncing nuclear weapons be written into the campaign's policy statement.

The Executive Committee, unaccustomed to such rough treatment, accepted the inevitable, but stalled a little. A 'clarification' of the policy statement would replace the old one, but they refused to send it to the press. It was just as well that they were amenable because refusal would, by then, have caused an enormous hullabaloo in the new campaign and, much more important, unilateralism gave the new movement its sharp cutting edge.

The new policy statement was very much tougher. Here it is:

The purpose of the Campaign is to press for a British initiative to reduce the nuclear peril and to stop the armaments race.

We shall seek to persuade the British people that Britain must:

- a. Renounce unconditionally the use or production of nuclear weapons and refuse to allow their use by others in her defence;
- b. Use her utmost endeavour to bring about negotiations at all levels for agreement to end the armaments race and to lead to a general disarmament convention;
- c. Invite the cooperation of other nations, particularly non-nuclear powers, in her renunciation of nuclear weapons.

This was followed by the short-term ban on tests, missile bases, overflights, and provision of nuclear weapons to other countries. It was also written in rather better English.

This was not the only reaction from the Central Hall meeting. Some of the audience, stirred by the excitement, demanded that they should all set off for Downing Street, conveniently nearby. The canon, who had not yet acquired his instinctive reaction to calls for direct action, told the audience that if they wanted to go there, they should. Quite a number did. Among those who turned up there were Mervyn Jones, Doris Lensing, and some students. The police, taken on the hop, reacted hastily. A few turned up, accompanied by dogs. Among those arrested were Mervyn and a Labour Party Member, David Owen Evans, who was later fined ten shillings. He rang up Canon Collins and said that since he had told him to go there, and had not come himself, the least he could do was to pay the fine. The Executive Committee, rapidly acquiring a tactful response, agreed to pay any fines which could not be met by the sinners.

The press, however, remained calm. Practically no newspaper even reported the meeting. The Times said not a word, though it subsequently included the meeting in its 'Events of the Year'. This, again, was a reflection of what was to follow.