

## Appointment in Wales

*When Richard  
Fletcher met  
Bertrand Russell*

*Tony Simpson*



*Tony Simpson interviewed  
Richard Fletcher at his  
home in London in August  
2022.*

Richard Fletcher went to Cambridge in 1947 to study natural sciences. Later, he became a research assistant to the distinguished nuclear physicist, Otto Frisch, at the Cavendish Laboratory there. Before Cambridge, Frisch had worked at Los Alamos as part of the team assembling the first atomic bombs to be exploded over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. ‘All my life I have been interested in the design of scientific devices,’ wrote Frisch in his memoir. Fletcher seems to share some of that enthusiasm for design, although for avowedly peaceful purposes as he pioneered innovative processes, particularly of battery powered vehicles. His long-term collaboration with Mike Cooley and others continues to yield new insights into the possibilities of socially useful production, a concept initiated by shop stewards at the armaments company, Lucas Aerospace, in the 1970s. In his tenth decade, Richard Fletcher’s creativity is undimmed.

Fletcher first encountered Bertrand Russell whilst an undergraduate at Cambridge. Russell had returned there from the United States in 1944 when Trinity College invited him to a five-year lectureship. His lectures attracted large audiences and Fletcher recalls Russell’s distinctive speaking voice: ‘fire, water, earth, air’. With friends, he would walk round Cambridge imitating Russell naming the four elements.

In the late 1950s, Fletcher and his wife, Patricia, were intensely engaged in the mass campaign against nuclear testing and the proliferation of hydrogen bombs, which were vastly more destructive than the

atomic bombs used by the Americans against Japan. In 1958, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) was launched with Bertrand Russell as President. In 1959, Labour lost the General Election and the Conservative Government continued adding to its nuclear arsenal as well as permitting US nuclear weapons to be stationed in Britain. Frank Cousins, leader of Britain's largest trade union, the Transport and General Workers, also appreciated the existential threat posed by hydrogen bombs. At the Labour Party Conference in Scarborough in 1960, Cousins, Fletcher and others successfully committed the Party to a non-nuclear defence policy against the public position of its leader, Hugh Gaitskell. A year later in Blackpool, the policy was reversed. It was after this defeat that the Fletchers travelled to North Wales to meet with Bertrand Russell in November 1961.

Fletcher had worked very hard to secure the vote for a non-nuclear defence policy at Scarborough in 1960. He told me:

*'We had naively organised this first pre-compositing meeting inside the Labour Party to try and defeat Gaitskell. We didn't know anything about politics. There was something like 90 resolutions in support of CND sent into conference. I knew nothing about these things but I organised the pre-compositing meeting and everybody came. There were all these people: Frank Cousins of the TGWU, Horner of the Fire Brigades. Everybody was there all sitting in a row looking at me and saying, "let's get started!" Fortunately, Ian Mikardo was there. He was a bit more experienced and got the meeting going. One lunatic wanted to attach condemnation of NATO. Cousins said, "if you attach condemnation of NATO, I'm sorry I can't vote for it because I haven't got the mandate from my members". Cousins operated the Union rules strictly and if he didn't have a mandate, he couldn't do it. "So tell me if you want me," said Cousins. "But if you take opposition to NATO, I can't deliver my delegation's vote." This haggling went on for some hours. Harry Crane spoke on behalf of the Labour Party platform. He was constantly trying to steer everybody towards this NATO resolution. He didn't succeed. Mikado pulled out a chair and said "come and stand on this chair, Harry, and tell us what we've decided". Mikado held his hand while Crane read something out. We said, "no, that's not what we decided". Crane was trying every which way because he knew his position in the Party depended on him delivering the goods. Otherwise he'd be useless. We defeated this horrible stroke and the resolution went to conference and was carried. It really set the cat amongst the pigeons. There were American diplomats around. It stirred up a hornets' nest.'*

Such was the hornets' nest that the vote was decisively reversed at the subsequent Labour Party Conference in Blackpool in 1961 and Gaitskell won a famous victory.

So, by the time Richard and Patricia Fletcher met with Russell in November 1961, there was a major reversal of policy within the Labour Party. Russell had recently been released from Brixton Prison where he was sent for a week for refusing to promise not to engage in non-violent civil disobedience. In his statement at Bow Street in September 1961, Russell said: 'Non-violent civil disobedience was forced upon us by the fact that it was more fully reported than other methods of making the facts known, and that caused people to ask what had induced us to adopt such a course of action.' Edith Russell was also sent to prison for a week, in Holloway. Others were imprisoned for longer terms.

In March 1960, Fletcher and his colleagues had sent Russell a manifesto for a new group that was being formed in Cambridge. In reply, Russell counselled caution, saying a new party needs funds. It is better to work for the conversion of the Labour Party, said Russell. By the end of April, Russell was writing to Fletcher to say that he had grave doubts whether he should remain in the Labour Party, but he would see what the October Party conference would bring. Fletcher burst into action as the conference approached, as we have seen. Russell invited Fletcher for a thorough discussion, although the meeting did not take place until November 1961. In July 1960, Russell told Fletcher: 'As for relations with the Liberal Party, I think we should support any Liberal candidate who is a unilateralist unless he is standing against a Labour candidate who is also a unilateralist.' Russell understood 'unilateralist' to mean nuclear disarmament by the United Kingdom with no expectation of reciprocal nuclear disarmament by the Soviet Union or others. He urged the Soviet Union and United States to negotiate to reduce the threat of nuclear conflict with a view to nuclear disarmament.

Meanwhile, Russell's relations with Canon John Collins, the Chair of CND, were becoming strained. In particular, Russell was more supportive of those activists engaging in direct action such as sit-down protests, in which he participated himself. In September 1960, Patricia Fletcher sent Russell an exchange of letters with Collins about the Labour Party and other matters. Russell replied that he had 'read Canon Collins letter carefully and I think that *some* of his points are valid. It is undoubtedly true, as he says, that the great majority of the delegates at Scarborough will be mandated already and not open to last minute influences.' Russell added that he was prepared to ignore Collins on direct action – the Canon was not

at all keen on such conduct, seeing it as divisive and alienating potential support. On 19 September, shortly before the Labour Party Conference was due to open in Scarborough, the Fletchers sent Russell a 'copy for mimeograph' of what they proposed to circulate to delegates. On 29 September, Russell replied to say 'as you will know, although I was anxious not to quarrel with Canon Collins, events have forced a public disagreement on the question of Direct Action. I am afraid this may have a bad effect at Scarborough, which I shall deeply regret.' In the event, the votes at Scarborough in 1960 registered a signal success for nuclear disarmament. Later in October, the formation of the Committee of 100 was announced, arguing for mass civil disobedience to somehow compel the removal of nuclear weapons. Russell put himself at the head of the campaign, supported by Ralph Schoenman. Michael Randle and others, and he resigned the presidency of CND. It would be four more years before Russell publicly tore up his Labour Party membership card, in October 1965, by which time Harold Wilson was the Labour Prime Minister whose foreign policy, particularly in relation to the US war on Vietnam, appalled Russell in many respects.

Russell had counselled Fletcher against trying to set up a rival party to Labour, and subsequently lost patience with the Party himself. Nevertheless, Fletcher seems to have taken Russell's advice to heart because he continued to lobby Labour Party conferences for decades afterwards. *The Observer* newspaper had a 'Briefing' section. Fletcher cut out the banner and used it as artwork for the first Labour Party Conference *Briefing*. Delegates readily accepted free copies that were handed out each morning, which set out the key votes of the day ahead. It was this work at Conference that brought Fletcher into close contact with Ken Coates, who acknowledged Fletcher's organisational flair with *Briefing* and *Voice of the Unions*. In due course, Russell invited Coates to work with him in the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation. *Briefing* in different guises continues to appear at Labour Party Conferences.

'My letter to Russell must be somewhere in the Archives,' says Fletcher. In fact, there are some 20 items of correspondence between Bertrand Russell, Richard and Patricia Fletcher, as well as Russell's assistants Christopher Farley, Ralph Schoenman and Russell Stetler listed in the BRACERS database of the Bertrand Russell Archives at McMaster University, Canada. They span the last decade of Russell's life in the 1960s.