

## Would you press the button?

*Peggy Duff*

Left, Left, Left: A personal account of six protest campaigns 1945-65 by *Peggy Duff* was published by *Allison & Busby* in London in 1971. In this excerpt, *Peggy* reflects on the momentous events of 1961 and the tensions between CND and the Committee of 100, whose direct actions against the nuclear peril brought it into conflict with the law and Canon Collins, Chairman of CND.

... It is not my intention to write here a history of the Committee of 100 – I would not presume. In any case, I know very little of what went on inside it, though the *Manchester Guardian* regularly carried reports of its secret and private meetings. All I want to do here is to retail its activities in relation to the movement as a whole, and to outline the impact of its major demonstrations on CND.

Certainly, throughout 1961 the escalation of the nuclear threat, combined with the de-escalation of support in the Labour Party, gave the Committee great impetus and brought them mass support.

The first demonstration on 18 February brought out thousands. They sat by the Ministry of Defence, then on the corner of Parliament Square. Nobody was arrested.

In their second demonstration, planned for 29 April, the Committee aimed to take over Parliament Square. They marched down Whitehall and this time the police were not so amenable as they had been on 18 February. They marched into a pocket of police in Whitehall, where they sat. 826 were arrested. Most of them were fined £1. *In toto*, quite a lot of money.

The biggest of all their demonstrations and the peak of the Committee's activities was on 17 September 1961. There was a parallel demonstration the same day at Holy Loch. The Government made a tremendous contribution to its success. In the first week of September they arrested thirty-six of the better known members of the Committee, including both Lord and Lady Russell. They appeared at Bow Street and, under an Act of 1361, were asked to bind themselves over to keep the peace. Thirty-two out of



the thirty-six refused. The other four had commitments they could not break. Most of them were sentenced to two months in prison, including Lord Russell. It was an enormous piece of stupidity on the part of the Government. Russell's sentence was later reduced to one week, but a week was bad enough. The sight of the old philosopher being driven away in a black maria stirred not only the campaign but the whole of Britain.

Then the police, or rather the Home Office, put a Public Order Act on a large area around Trafalgar Square, stretching as far east as Temple Bar at the junction of the Strand and Fleet Street.

The CND Executive Committee met at 2.30 pm on the day of the demonstration. It considered the situation in relation to the arrest and imprisonment of members of the Committee and the imposition of the Public Order Act. It was agreed, as I had planned, that 'the Executive Committee would proceed as a body to the periphery of the area covered by the order, and should then seek, as private citizens, and with no intention of causing a breach of the peace, to make their way to the Square to do what they could', as they rather pompously recorded, 'to prevent the outbreak of any violence and to protect the right of individuals to...' etc.

This was one occasion on which there was excellent liaison between the CND Office and London Region CND. Just as this proposal was agreed, there was a knock on the side door of 2 Amen Court. There was Ted Hilley, chairman of London Region CND. 'Peggy,' he said, 'if the Executive Committee is thinking of walking down to the Square, there are one or two people out here in Ludgate Hill who would like to go with them.' So out we went into Ludgate Hill and there, thanks to a last-minute circular and a lot of phone calls, were several hundred campaigners from the London Region.

We marched together down Ludgate Hill and up Fleet Street to Temple Bar where we met a cordon of police. 'Can we go on as individuals?' we asked. They agreed. So we broke up into groups, jumped onto buses, and all of us somehow got to the Square.

It was an extraordinary sight. In the Square itself there were many thousands. It was impossible to tell how many. And all around it there was a thick queue of people perambulating round, because the police would not permit anyone to stop. So round and round we went, and as we went we kept meeting people we knew or recognized – Elwyn Jones, later Attorney General, Marghanita Laski, Fenner Brockway, many MPs, a great many campaigners.

Round and round we went, and always there was this almost irresistible impulse to join the others in the Square itself, always this uncomfortable, unhappy feeling of being shut out. Canon Collins, of course, as soon as he

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appeared, was nobbled by TV. I thought he made a great mistake that day of all days. Committed as he was to the need to keep CND legal, he concentrated on telling Britain over the air that this was not a CND demonstration, that CND did not involve itself in civil disobedience. While there in the Square itself were thousands of people who had marched with him from Aldermaston, worked on the local committees, helped to make CND what it had become, sitting to defy the Government.

There was a feeling about the Square that day which I found later in Paris during May and June 1968 – a feeling of revolution, of real challenge. You felt it sometimes at the end of Aldermaston marches as all those thousands of people marched up Whitehall, but it was never as clear and evocative as on that day.

Gradually, it began to get dark. Gradually, people walking around the Square started to go home. Only the thousand or so in the inner Square stayed and sat undeterred. Then as dusk came down, and as the police realized that they might well stay there all night and into the next day, they began to lose patience. It was then that they arrested Fenner Brockway and Canon Collins, the only two then left in the Square who might successfully have testified against them. After that, they got rough with the people in the Square, threw Adam Roberts into the fountain, and arrested 1,314. At Holy Loch a further 351 were also arrested.

That, for me, was the peak of the Committee. Nothing they did after that was on a par with that day and night. The next demonstration, the next big sit-down confrontation, we planned at Wethersfield, the base in Essex from which the 1961 Easter March had started. That was a colossal mistake. For the confrontation both of the Committee and of the Campaign in that year was with the Government, with the Labour Party, with power; and power was in London, not at a remote Essex base. This was why, quite rightly, CND turned the 1959 march round, started it at Aldermaston and ended it in Trafalgar Square.

The Government made the same mistakes as before, raiding and searching the Committee offices and the homes of five of the leading organizers – Ian Dixon, Terry Chandler, Trevor Hatton, Michael Randle and Pat Pottle; but they left Lord Russell alone. On the day preceding the demonstration, the five of them, together with Helen Allegranza, were arrested and charged with conspiracy under the Official Secrets Act, and were remanded on bail. Enormous precautions were taken at Wethersfield. They built a twelve-foot high wire fence around the base. A Braintree School was requisitioned as a Court House. All police leave was stopped and three thousand civil and military police mobilized.



In spite of the fact that very few pledges had been received, several thousands turned up at Wethersfield. But the base was too remote. The weather was lousy – wet and misty. The feeling of challenge, of confrontation, that had been so strong in the Square in September, was missing in the wilds of Essex in December ...

