

Foreign Policy

Bertrand Russell

Russell's excoriating speech on the Labour Government's Foreign Policy was delivered to a meeting of the Youth Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament on 14 October 1965, a year after the formation of Prime Minister Harold Wilson's first government.

As some of you may possibly remember, I made a speech at the London School of Economics on the 15th of February [1965] in which I, first, recalled the election Manifesto of the Labour Party before last year's General Election and, then, compared it with what the Labour Government had been doing. It appeared that the Labour Government's record had completely failed to make even a beginning of carrying out its electoral promises. Today, I wish to consider the actions of the Labour Government since that time and to inquire, in view of their record, how anybody can continue to support them.

The Labour Government, as I shall try to persuade you, has acted in complete subservience to the Government of the United States. Those who had hoped for any improvement in international policies, have suffered a double misfortune: there were elections both in America and in Britain. In both elections, the more ferocious party was defeated. After those elections, the Governments which had been elected adopted the policy of their defeated opponents. The result has been a growth of atrocious cruelty in various parts of the world. Attempts have been made to conceal these acts. I wish to join those who try to defeat such attempts.

In my speech of February 15 I came to the conclusion that the only promise concerning foreign policy made by the Labour Party in its electoral Manifesto which the Labour Government had carried out in its early months of office was to appoint a Minister for Disarmament in the Foreign Office. After a year, this remains the sum of the Government's achievement in carrying out its promises.

But I propose now to consider what the Government *has* done.

The sins of the present British Government in foreign policy are of two sorts: there are minor sins which consist of desperate efforts to hang onto some shreds of the decaying British Empire, and there are other, much worse, sins which consist of supporting America in unspeakable atrocities. Of the former sort, one might mention Aden, where Britain is carrying out her old Imperialist policies in support of her continuing imperialism in the Far East. One may mention, also, North Borneo where we have a large army at war with Indonesia. British Guiana has a constitution forced upon it by the Tories and so jerrymandered as to be totally unacceptable to the majority of the inhabitants. This constitution, our present "Labour" Government continues to support. In all these cases its policy is merely a continuation of the bad policy of previous Governments.

In Rhodesia, the situation is in doubt. Though up to this time the Labour Government has continued Tory policy, it now appears to be making some real effort to support majority rule there. It remains to be seen if it will act strongly, or merely talk.

To come nearer home, the Government has issued a White Paper concerned with the problem of immigration. It has attacked none of the problems which make the present immigration difficult – problems such as housing and education of immigrants – but it merely proposes to limit the numbers of immigrants. Even there, it misses the point, its proposals would limit the unskilled immigrants who are necessary to British economy as it is now geared, but leaves loopholes whereby the number of skilled workers remains high while our own skilled workers, themselves, emigrate.

But what is much more serious is our Government's support of America no matter what America may do. The holders of power in America have invented a myth by which they profess to justify cruelties equalling those of Hitler. This myth has two sides: on the one hand, it holds that all Communists are wicked; on the other hand, it holds that all movements of reform, everywhere, are inspired or captured by Communists and are, therefore, to be combatted from their inception. This myth is held to justify the upholding of corrupt governments wherever the United States has the power to do so. It is pretended that populations cannot possibly like the sort of governments that Communists inspire, or dislike the kind of tyranny which Americans describe as "The Free World".

Throughout South America there are political contests between democratic parties and parties supported by America. The latter represents capitalism in its crudest form. But everywhere, excepting Cuba, American hostility has prevented the democratic parties from achieving power. The recent troubles in San Domingo are a case very much in point.

The worst aspects of American dominion, however, are being displayed in South Vietnam – again supported by Britain. America has no vestige or shred of right to take any [part] in the affairs of Vietnam. When the French were finally expelled from Indo-China, of which Vietnam was a part, an international congress at Geneva decided that Vietnam, North and South, should be independent and should if they wished be unified after free elections. Britain and Russia jointly were the initiators of this policy. The Americans, however, though they agreed to support it, did not like it. They sent “observers” to South Vietnam who reported that the country was too disturbed for elections. The Americans proceeded to make friends with the small faction that had previously supported the French. Their “observers” became more and more numerous and more and more in the habit, as “advisers”, of giving orders to the puppet Government which they installed. The population rebelled and the peasants were moved into “Strategic Hamlets” – “for their protection” it was said, but the Hamlets were, in fact, concentration camps. They refused to submit and inaugurated guerrilla warfare. The guerrilla armies were nicknamed the “Vietcong”, and the civilian authority which they acknowledged was called the National Liberation Front. A long, long war began. So far, there is no prospect of an end to it. The Chairman of the US Senate Committee on Preparedness stated recently: “We still have a long, hard, bloody road ahead. We may have to keep our troops in Vietnam for fifteen years or longer”. (*Herald Tribune*, 27 September 1965).

Gradually, we have been allowed to become aware that American troops in South Vietnam behave in a manner in which, one would have thought, no civilized troops would behave. They use Napalm which adheres to the skin and causes unspeakable agony. They use gas to smoke out suspected Vietcong hiding places. They attack civilians from the air. When they capture civilians, they torture them. According to the *New York Times* of October 3, 1965, there have been up to the beginning of October, 170,000 civilians killed; 800,000 maimed by torture; 5,000 burnt alive, disembowelled or beheaded; 100,000 killed or maimed by chemical poisons; 400,000 detained and tortured savagely. One method of torture used by the American troops is partial electrocution or “frying” as one United States Adviser called it – by attaching live wires to male genital organs or to the breasts of Vietcong women prisoners. Other techniques which are designed to force on-looking prisoners to talk, involve their watching the cutting off of the fingers, ears, fingernails or sexual organs of other prisoners. A string of ears decorates the wall of a Government installation. These details were reported by the *New York Herald Tribune* (not a subversive journal) on July 21, 1965.



At a sit-down protest in London in 1961. From the photo album presented to Russell by the Vietnamese Committee of Struggle Against US Imperialism in November 1964

On July 18 of this year, the US Associated Press reported: "The wailing of women and the stench of burnt bodies greeted the troops as they marched in Bagia" (a province of South Vietnam). "A United States Air Force officer said, 'When we are in a bind we unload on the whole area. We kill more women and children than we do Vietcong, but the Government troops just aren't available, so this is the only answer.'" I could continue indefinitely with such quotations. The stomachs of pregnant women have been ripped open and their unborn children publicly exhibited. But the tale is sickening. I cannot bear to tell the whole of it – nor could you bear to listen.

Meantime, of course – and again with our concurrence – the Americans have carried the war into North Vietnam where they have deliberately bombed schools, hospitals and orphanages – more civilians than armed forces. They even proposed for a time to bomb the great dams which would have caused such flooding and devastation and loss of life that the rest of the world cried out against it and it has been ostensibly given up and the US has denied that it ever had such an intention.

There are other matters such as the problem of the refugees, who are suffering exposure and starvation, and the public execution of prisoners. But there is not time for me to go into all the horrors even if I would.

Apropos of the public execution of prisoners, however, I should like to

bring up another problem:

These public executions were first indulged in by the United States Forces and the South Vietnamese Government. They have been answered by reprisals in kind, though so far, I believe, fewer in number, by the Vietcong. There is an acceleration in savagery which is to be expected and which is one of the worst aspects of guerrilla war – indeed, any war. But this is the responsibility of the invader.

I should like to call your attention to an article concerning the Congo which appeared in the *Observer* of August 29 entitled ‘Mercenary exposes Horror’ which was answered in the following week’s *Observer* by a letter entitled ‘Congo Mercenaries’. This letter points up what I am trying to say about the inevitable and limitless hardening of cruelty under the stress of war. The policies at present condoned by the Labour Government involve, inevitably, the condoning of the methods of carrying them out.

In the Congo, as well as in Vietnam, our Labour Government has supported the United States.

Concurrently with the savageries and unbridled cruelty of the war in Vietnam the United States has initiated a programme of sweetness and light: The U.S. Forces there are given small cards urging a display of strength, understanding and generosity upon them and nine rules of conduct for their guidance. These were printed in the *Daily Worker*, 22 September 1965, and are as follows:

- “1. Remember we are guests here. We make no demands and seek no special treatment;
2. Join with the people, understand their life, use phrases from their language and honour their customs and laws;
3. Treat women with politeness and respect;
4. Make personal friends among the soldiers and common people;
5. Always give the Vietnamese right of way;
6. Be alert to security and ready to react with your military skill;
7. Don't attract attention by loud, rude or unusual behaviour;
8. Avoid separating yourself from the people by a display of wealth or privilege;
9. Above all else you are members of the US military forces on a difficult mission, responsible for all your official and personal actions.”

These cards of exhortations end: “Reflect honour upon yourself and the United States of America”.

I ask you to contrast these precepts with the actions of the armed forces

of the US in Vietnam to a few of which I called your attention a short time ago.

For anyone interested in hypocrisy these exhortations make an absorbing study. For anyone interested in humanity this gilding of a very rotten and stinking lily is nauseating.

But this propaganda campaign has been carried further than mere precepts. On September 11 our papers, most, if not all of them, carried reports of one of its most egregious actions:

On September 10, the day of a children's festival in North Vietnam, American aircraft showered on five North Vietnamese cities 10,000 packages of toys, school supplies and soap labelled "From the children of South Vietnam to the children of North Vietnam".

"The United States and South Vietnamese psychological warfare experts", reports *The Times* on September 11, "devised the packages for which the Vietnamese Government paid. The five cities are all in an area from 30 miles north of the border to 70 miles north of Hanoi."

The report ends: "In South Vietnam American and Vietnamese marines pressed on with a search and destroy operation which has so far killed 167 guerrillas." The day before, the US aircraft had been employed in destroying bridges in North Vietnam.

It is to be noted that the area over which the packages were rained upon the inhabitants had been bombed by the U.S. forces. As the *Daily Worker* remarked (11.9.65) the precious parcels fell upon children, some of whom had no eyes to see them and no hands to grasp them, because of previous raids of the US Air Force with their high explosives, Napalm and Lazy Dogs.

The extreme cynicism of these propaganda actions has rarely, if ever, been equalled. Yet there has been little notice taken of them in our press – save in the *Daily Worker* – and very little outcry against them amongst the general public.

We, through our Government, are condoning such actions.

If further evidence of the hypocrisy that we support is needed, there is plenty of it: On September 23, the US Ambassador to the United Nations said: "We seek only to insure the independence of South Vietnam ... and opportunity for its people to determine their own future ... by the principles of self-determination." On September 23 he also said, in arguing against the admission of Communist China: "The Members of the United Nations, under the Charter, share a common responsibility to demonstrate to those who use violence that violence does not pay." It will be difficult for the Pope's plea for peace to move very deeply those who subscribe to such

double talk – and our Government is among such subscribers. Mr. Stewart's "handbook for nations" will hardly help.

We must remember that this sort of thing is supported by a Government for which we voted and which promised in its election Manifesto things far different from these. It may be that the Government finds it easier than many laymen to accept the cynical opposition of fair words and savage cruelty since it has apparently accepted and defended the opposition of its actions to its own promises of little more than a year ago.

When I compare the horrors of the Vietnam war with the election Manifesto of the Labour Government, I find myself confronted with the most shameful betrayal of modern times in this country. Hitler, at least, never professed humanity, but these men who now pollute the chairs of office professed, before election, the most noble and lofty ideals of human brotherhood.

The British Government has, it is true, made some apparent efforts to bring to an end the Vietnam war. It has refused to send troops to South Vietnam – but that, one suspects, was due to the fact that all the troops that we could spare were needed in Malaysia. Our Government, supported by the majority of the Commonwealth countries, has suggested terms of peace, but these always have been such as would leave American forces on the soil of Vietnam and were plainly and blantly illusory.

Concurrently with these unreal efforts for peace, the British Government has iterated and reiterated, again and again, its support of United States policy in Vietnam. It has done everything in its power, moreover, to prevent a knowledge of the atrocities which are taking place there – let alone a knowledge of the reasons for the Government's complacency in face of them. Representatives of the National Liberation Front applied for visas to be allowed to state their case in Britain. Visas were refused by the Home Secretary, supported by the Prime Minister, without explanation.

It will be remembered that at Oxford Mr. [Michael] Stewart [Foreign Secretary] stated the importance of all points of view being heard by the British public on Vietnam. It will also be remembered that the Labour Party Manifesto states that the Labour Government would welcome criticism and discussion with all in the Party.

When the visas – for which the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation had applied on behalf of the three members of the National Liberation Front – had been refused, Field Marshal Auchinleck, Archbishop Roberts, The Bishop of Southwark, Lord Silkin (the Leader in the Lords), Kingsley Martin, and Professors from several universities, joined 25 Members of Parliament in requesting the visas on the ground of free speech and the right

of the British people to hear the spokesman on Foreign Affairs of the NLF. But the Home Secretary refused to receive a delegation of these people to discuss the matter as "no useful purpose would be served."

At the Labour Party Conference the Executive refused to allow the emergency resolution of Nottingham City Labour Party calling for the granting of visas to be put on the agenda. When the President of the Nottingham Labour Party tried to give a speech on the subject, the microphones were cut off by the Chairman.

And yet France has granted visas to them and they toured France. Sweden has officially invited them and Canada has granted them visas. Only Britain under the Labour Government refuses.

The Prime Minister, speaking at Blackpool said that were the members of the NLF coming for the purpose of serious negotiation they would come to the Government. But since they were coming to speak to the British public, it was evident that they were coming for purposes of propaganda and that could not be permitted. One wonders why Mr. Cabot Lodge was given a visa to come to speak at the Teach-in at Oxford.

It is to be noted that visas which the CND tried to obtain for representatives of North Vietnam have also been refused.

The immediate situation is dark. The Labour Government has not only not carried out its electoral promises, but has reversed them. In carrying out Tory policies and in its subservience to America, it is helping to bring the world to complete disaster. One must hope that opposition to this policy will grow stronger before long. Especially, it must be hoped that the young, who have not shared in the atrocities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki or in the shameful dishonesty of so-called "disarmament" conferences, will retain their indignation as they grow older and will, at last, prevail upon mankind to permit the creation of that happier world which was once the aspiration of the Labour Party.

For my part, I feel that I can no longer remain a member of this so-called "Labour" Party, and I am resigning after 51 years.

It is time that a new movement leading to a new Party more nearly like the movement for which Keir Hardie struggled, be formed to carry out the aspirations of those who have hitherto upheld the present Party.