



conscience update

issue 115

winter 2001/2

newsletter of **conscience** THE PEACE TAX CAMPAIGN

slow progress at the Treasury

A delegation from the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) finally met with Treasury Minister Paul Boateng in October. The much delayed meeting offered little hope that the Treasury are about to acknowledge the right of conscientious objectors to refuse to pay for war, but some subtle shifts in their position bode well for the future.

The Treasury's current position is that the corporate nature of the tax system would be undermined by giving COs the right to divert their taxes from the military budget and that if COs don't like the current government's spending priorities, they can vote for another party at the next election.

The most significant thing about this argument is that the Treasury have changed their position again (in this issue's Centrepeace we look at the arguments that the Treasury used to use, but have given up on). Continual pressure from peace tax campaigners is obviously causing the Treasury to think through their arguments and it seems that they agree with us that their previous arguments are inadequate.

An important result of the meeting is that with all the red herrings cleared away the key question can be addressed. The Treasury does not see a moral



Death and taxes are infamous certainties, but will conscientious objector's taxes always be spent on killing?

equivalence between physical conscription and financial conscription – we do. For most of the life of our campaign we were faced with a government which would not listen. Since 1997, Labour has listened, but it has taken four and a half years to get to the heart of the matter. We have come a long way and though the hardest work is still in front of us, we can enter 2002 with hope of real progress.

- If you would like to join our growing list of lobbyists and receive additional lobbying briefings, please contact Jackie in the office (contact details on page 3).

stop press

CND has called another national demonstration against the war on 26 January. Contact CND on 020 7700 2393 for details.

conscience
campaigns for the legal right for those who have a conscientious objection to war to have the military part of their taxes spent on peacebuilding initiatives

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war tax resistance

The UK's involvement in the military campaign against Afghanistan has highlighted the link between our taxes and the death and destruction caused by modern warfare. There has been a significant increase in the number of people requesting information about war tax resistance and we expect there to be at least one test case under the Human Rights Act in 2002.

The government's unfortunate decision to pursue a "war against terrorism" when even the Chief of Defence Staff accepts that terrorists cannot be defeated by military might, but only by working to remove the causes of terrorism, means that there may be significant public interest in war tax resistance cases if they come to court. We are working with several war tax resisters and are trying to build up a network of sympathetic lawyers we can call upon.

- If you are, or can put us in touch with, a lawyer who may be prepared to offer *pro bono* advice in war tax resistance cases, please contact Jackie in the office.

party conferences

Peace Exchange, the social event organised for Labour Party Conference delegates by a coalition of peace groups was well attended, despite the atrocious weather. Over 100 people were addressed four MPs and one Lord. This

event, combined with our well-located stall (the location for Tony Benn's first TV interview of the conference) ensured that once again, **conscience** made its presence felt.

We also attended an important consultation session at the Liberal Democrat conference, ensuring that **conscience** has an input into their new defence policy.

The links we build at party conferences are vital to our year-round lobbying work, but our face-to-face contact with MPs is much more useful if it is backed up with regular contact from their constituents or members of their own party.

- If you are a member of a political party and would be willing to help **conscience** work within your party, please contact Jackie.

MPs discuss conflict prevention

A meeting of MPs and campaigners called by Lib Dem MP Lembit Opik looks likely to result in the establishment of an all-party group on conflict prevention.

Jackie Hoskins, our Campaigns & Parliamentary Officer has set up a meeting in January between Lembit Opik and John McDonnell MP to see how the work **conscience** has done on non-military security over the past two years can be used to further the work of the new group.

advance warning

The 2002 **conscience** annual event will be held in July this year - the exact date will be confirmed in our next newsletter. Additionally there are two major international conferences coming up.

The triennial conference of War Resisters' International is being held in Dublin in early August and the biennial Conference of War Tax Resistance and Peace Tax Campaigns takes place in Berlin 6-9 September. More details of the Berlin conference will be published in our next newsletter and you can find out more about the WRI Triennial, entitled Stories & Strategies, Nonviolent Resistance and Social Change, from: War Resisters' International, 5 Caledonian Road, London N1 9DX t 020-7278 4040 e triennial2002@wri-irg.org

members' news

diary

a grand day out

Fifty **conscience** members went to Brighton in October – not to paddle in the Channel, but to discuss responses to conflict with other members and a wide range of guest speakers. We spent the morning looking at how civilians from various non-governmental organisations are working all over the world to prevent violence and to help restore peace. There were useful presentations from Michael Page of International Alert and Tim Wallis of Peaceworkers UK and we were especially moved by the stories of PBI volunteer Eleanor Openshaw's experiences in Columbia.

Janet Bloomfield, from the Oxford Research Group, lead a mini-workshop on dialoguing with decision makers, which was such a success that we are thinking of holding a day-long workshop on this in 2002.

After lunch we heard from Julie Ashdown of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office about the new Cross-Departmental Fund for conflict prevention and from David Lepper MP about how national and local government can play a role in conflict prevention. Jean Lambert MEP gave an excellent response to the international situation in the light of the 11 September and the attacks on Afghanistan, which had started only that week. She stressed

the importance of non-military solutions and international law and opposed attempts to counter violence with violence.

We rounded off the day with a participatory workshop, focussing on how we as individuals could respond to conflict and went away enthused with a feeling that we are not powerless and that we really can make a difference.

thank you

Thanks to all members who have responded to our winter appeal and if you have not yet responded, it is not too late. Thanks also to all those members who donate by standing order – this cuts down administration costs and frees up staff time for more campaigning work.

■ If you are renewing your membership, please consider donating by standing order.

more thanks

Another year has passed and another newsletter has been sent out by our dedicated volunteer team. Thanks to Lorna, Pete, Mary Lou, Adrian, Claire and Jessica. Thanks also to Jane and Monica for their help in the office and to Irene for proof-reading.

■ If you can spare a few hours every now and again to help **conscience**, please contact Jon in the office.

11-13 February

the BIG blockade Faslane, Scotland

Block 'n Roll! Three days of protest & nonviolent direct action at Britain's nuclear weapons base.

t 0845 4588361

(local rate)

e big_blockade@hotmail.com

16 February Treaties Day School

9am - 6pm, London School of Economics, London WC2

All you ever wanted to know about nuclear weapons treaties – what they do, what they don't do and how a treaty to ban all nukes could work. Guest speaker: Merav Datan, International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, USA. Admission £5. Places are limited so early booking is essential.

Treaties Day School, c/o CCND, 162 Holloway Road, London N7 8DQ
e ccnd@gn.apc.org

15 May

International Conscientious Objectors' Day

Events in London and around the country. More details in our next newsletter.

contacting the office

general enquiries

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e info@conscienceonline.org.uk

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t as left - ask for Jackie

e lobby@conscienceonline.org.uk

membership enquiries

t as left - ask for Jon

e develop@conscienceonline.org.uk

the state of the arguments

Though the Treasury may have given up on some of their old arguments (see p 1), many MPs still trot out the same old lines when replying to constituents. Below, Jon Nott runs through the main arguments used by those who don't understand our case – and points out the flaws.

the floodgates

The commonest, and weakest, argument against legislation to recognise the rights of conscientious objectors is that it would “open the floodgates” to a range of other objectors to various government policies. Many who use this argument try to list those who would try to use our success as a precedent. Where the argument falls down is that most of the “flood” of causes are based on political preference rather than conscientious objection – one may prefer private provision of education or health services, but it is not a question of conscience.

In fact there are only three areas where the claim of conscience is recognised in law. First is conscientious objection to military service, the right we are trying to extend to cope with the changed nature of warfare. Second is the right of a medical practitioner to refuse to take part in abortion procedures. Thirdly, although this no longer applies in Britain, is the right not to be “conscripted” into the role of executioner in a state where the death penalty is still used.

So in reality, the flood of causes which could use our success as a precedent is only one cause. We are not aware of any campaign by pro-life/anti-abortion groups to divert their taxes away from NHS abortions and towards an alternative such as sex education, but even if there is, we are talking about a single instance, not a flood.

practical difficulties

One of the first arguments to be dropped is the idea that there would be so many practical difficulties in

implementing the rights of COs to divert their taxes away from the military that even if the principle were conceded no change could take place. Considering the complexity of the tax system, finding a mechanism to track the contributions of registered COs would hardly tax the minds of the Inland Revenue civil servants. In any case, our proposed solution does not rely on tracking the contributions of an individual, but rather on calculating a national average and multiplying it by the number of registered COs.

hypothecation

Many MPs mistake our proposals for hypothecation – the collection of a specific tax which is then put directly into a specific budget. One example is the planned congestion charge in London, which would raise funds specifically for improving public transport rather than going into the general funds for running London. What we are asking for is not hypothecation because we are not asking for a percentage of a specific tax to be diverted, but for the military proportion of all taxes to be diverted. We are asking for the rights of COs to be recognised, not for a group of individuals to be able to choose where how their taxes are spent.

There has long been opposition to hypothecation in government circles as it is perceived as reducing the control the government has over setting budgets. While large scale hypothecation could clearly lead to chaos, small scale hypothecation is now recognised as a useful tool. The government's current willingness to experiment with hypothecation means that it is less likely

that people will try to use opposition to hypothecation as an argument against peace tax proposals, but as we have seen it is a red herring anyway.

undermining democracy

A newer argument is that recognising the rights of COs would undermine the democratic process, as people voted for a government committed to “defending the nation” and allowing COs to divert their taxes away from the military would be betraying the will of the people as expressed at the ballot box. There are two obvious flaws in this argument. Firstly, it is based on the absurd premise that the only way to ensure our national security is through force of arms – it is clear that security has at least as much to do with our diplomatic and trade relationships with the rest of the world as it does with the perceived strength of our armed forces. One of the clearest lessons of 11 September is that no amount of military might can make a nation invulnerable.

The second absurdity is the idea that a government can only do what it put in its manifesto or else it betrays the electorate. A government is given a five-year term to run the country, the manifesto is an indicator of how they will go about this, not a plan set in stone. A government which failed to respond to the changing will of the people, or ignored the rights of minorities would be the one betraying the electorate.

the corporate nature of taxation

The latest argument advanced is similar in that it proposes that recognising the rights of COs would undermine the basis of the taxation system. It is argued that the taxation system is collective in its nature in that all contribute to everything the government provides, even if they will not directly benefit

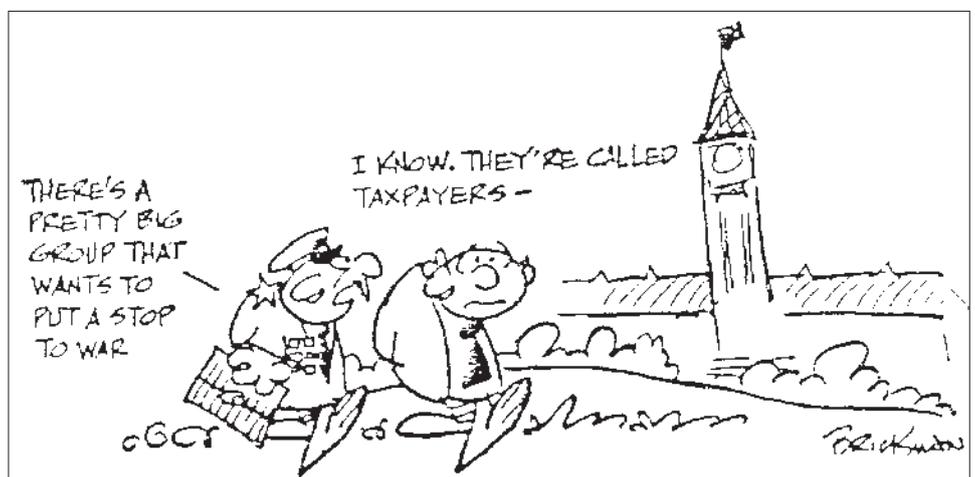
from it themselves. For example, everyone contributes to education - even if they have no children, people benefit indirectly from other people’s children being educated. There is an element of the flood gates argument in this, but more significantly it subjugates the individual’s rights to the collective rights and duties of society as a whole.

A similar debate took place regarding conscientious objection to military service – before the rights of COs were recognised in law it was held that the right of an individual to conscientiously object must give way to the right of the nation to raise an army to defend itself. In a way, therefore, this argument has already been won, but it hinges on the next argument.

no equivalence

The government contend that there is a moral distinction between military service and paying for the military via one’s taxes. We would argue that paying for someone else to kill on your behalf is morally equivalent to killing them yourself.

This is the discussion that **conscience** will be having with the government from now on. We may be aided by war tax resisters testing the Human Rights Act in the Courts, but the ultimate decision will be made in parliament. The work of members and our lobbyist network is vital to further progress.



explaining the inexplicable

Tom Keirans works for the National Campaign for a Peace Tax Fund, our American sister organisation. This article first appeared in their newsletter, back issues of which can be read at www.peacetax.com

“I didn’t even have my nap yet!” announced my delighted 5-year-old son when I collected him from school on September 11, 2001. His school is four blocks from the dome of the US Capitol building, and three planes had hit New York and Washington DC about an hour before. As we walked home, I realized that I hadn’t thought about how to explain his brief school day to him.

“There were some airplane crashes, and with all the confusion it is just better for people to be at home” was the best I could come up with. We fly quite frequently, including home to Ireland, and I want to do what I can to avoid his being anxious about such journeys.

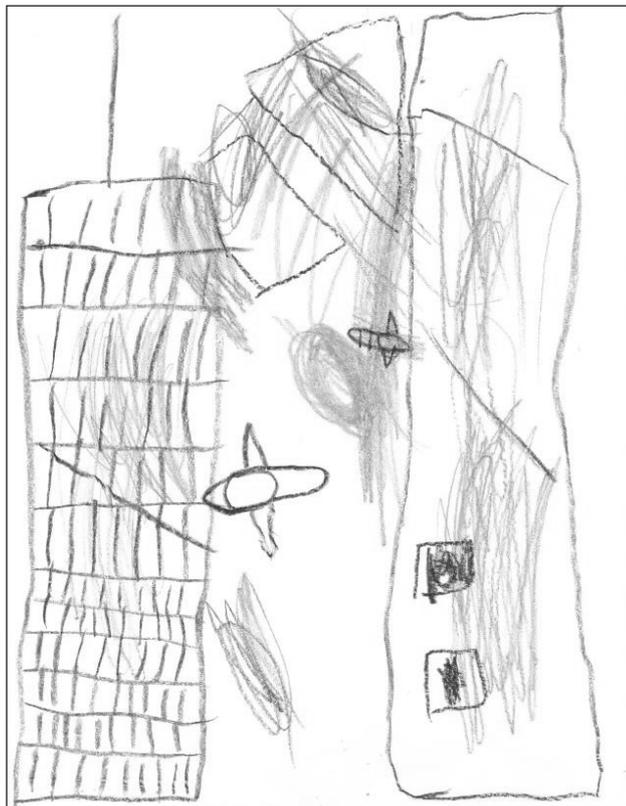
“Where were the crashes?” He was so disappointed; just weeks ago he had visited New York with his maternal grandparents and had dithered before electing to visit the Statue of Liberty instead of the World Trade Center twin

towers. Now they were gone. “Were people killed?” I said that I didn’t know. “It might have been just full of packages,” he speculated. “Who did it?”

“It seems that some very mean people did it on purpose,” I told him. I really should have collected my thoughts before collecting him. “But wouldn’t they be dead then themselves? Why would anyone do that?” I couldn’t think of an appropriate answer, beyond “politics.” I diverted instead to what a mean thing it was to do to the people in the buildings. It didn’t take long for his attention to wander from the news coverage to wanting to watch children’s television and to play with his toys. He built a Lego tower and smashed it with a toy plane, over and over.

I haven’t heard of anyone I know personally being a victim of the attacks in New York or Washington, and I hope I don’t. Life will gradually return to normal for my family and for that we’re very grateful. I am bracing myself, though, for the anticipated “retribution” bombing somewhere else, when my son will see misery inflicted on other people he doesn’t know. I know that he’ll want to know, since these attacks were so obviously terrible, why anyone could think it a good idea to attack people somewhere else.

I’ll have to avoid a “They did it first” explanation, since we don’t allow him to use that about his little brother. The diplomatic equivalent of sending the perpetrators to their collective room doesn’t quite seem appropriate or likely, so I expect to have many more difficult conversations about death and destruction, when a sane world would allow him to focus on his lawyerly arguments against going to bed on time.



The world according to Liam Kierans - aged 5½

review

continued from page 8

majority so making the likelihood of violence greater. But then when this happens we get the attention in the media...

All these points are discussed in the video, and not all interviewees have quite the same viewpoint. Mark Thomas said he could justify the use of non-peaceful behaviour in self-defence or if defending one's family or immediate community, but never by proxy. Others in the video quite clearly would only consider civil disobedience in the event of needing to defend oneself (in theory but of course what they would do in fact remains unknown – hopefully the situation would never arise).

A nonviolence training session is featured. In such a session, activists are shown how best to react in the event of an arrest at a sit-down protest; how to interact with arresting officers; make eye contact; be respectful; how to avoid aggravating the situation, how to peacefully make arrest more difficult (by linking arms or going limp when picked up). Several people stressed how important this training is, and said that at some point everyone who is involved in actions which are likely to result in arrest should attend a training session.

The video claims that each individual has to decide for themselves and do what they feel most comfortable with; in fact this point is made more than once. But the video is quite categorically for nonviolent action. The emphasis is of course on action within the peace movement, but there is brief mention of animal rights and environmental activists. There is reference to historical incidents and activists such as Gandhi

and Martin Luther King are shown as good examples of the effectiveness of nonviolent campaigners.

The people featured inspire one to believe that the little that one person can do can make a difference, however small, but also that we all have a part to play, not just those who are willing to risk breaking the law. There are examples of people acting as “legal observers” for example, which anyone (not just legal experts!) can do if one is not keen to get arrested.

A variety of actions is featured, and those planning a nonviolent campaign would probably find inspiration here.

Nonviolence for a Change. Video made by JustUs Productions on behalf of the Turning the Tide Programme of Quaker Peace & Social Witness. Running time 25 mins. The video can be obtained from: JustUs Productions, Friends Meeting House, St Giles, Oxford OX1 3LW

e justus@gn.apc.org

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REVIEW

Claire Poyner reviews **Nonviolence for a Change**, a video produced for the Quaker "Turning the Tide" programme.

"We want a peaceful world and the only way to get that is by peaceful means. If we want people to listen to us we must treat them with respect."

Ellen Moxley

The arguments surrounding the issue of nonviolence and direct action continue. The question of what constitutes "nonviolence" is not clear-cut. Many people would have no problem with activists damaging a Trident submarine, but is trashing a McDonald's acceptable? Or GM crops? Is violence against property only acceptable if there is no chance of people getting injured, or should casualties who work in certain industries be accepted as "collateral damage" (fox hunters;

laboratory staff)? Some people would also object to any act of violence which is directed only at property, even property which (in the case of Trident) is obviously designed to cause death and can arguably be called illegal.

And how do we measure the effectiveness of a campaign? Is violence the only way to get attention from the media? We could be forgiven for thinking so sometimes in terms of column inches, but how does this affect the validity of our campaign? Of course people will look differently upon us if there has been violence. Some of our potential supporters may be put off, may not attend later actions, leaving those who will consider using violence in a larger *continued on page 7*



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