

Towards Peace: A Full Report
of the 1947 Australian Pacifist
Conference January 1947
(Mt. Evelyn, Victoria.)

8.

England, and Miss Suzanne Adlan, who was visiting Australia after a prolonged sojourn teaching in China, were welcomed to Conference.

"FUNDAMENTALS OF PACIFISM"

by K.D. Rivett.

At the beginning of "What are you going to do about it?" Aldous Huxley makes a statement which would not have appeared in any political tract fifty or even twenty years before. Its purpose, he says, is to provide those who feel that pacifism is right with an intellectual justification for their feelings. In the situation which existed during the nineteen thirties, it may not have been for the pacifist movement to do anything more. But the future of pacifism depends on whether it can cease to be merely a 'rationalising' agitation, organising and confirming the views of those who have a predisposing bias towards pacifism, and become an originating force which will ultimately influence the course of events.

I would say at the outset that I do not consider this possibility the only justification of the pacifist movement, either now or in the past. Its mere existence is a standing challenge to those who favour the use of force in certain circumstances, leading them to define their views much more carefully than would otherwise be the case. It 'draws' a certain amount of antagonism which would otherwise be directed at more moderate proposals. Even if the pacifist issue never arises again in the form it did during the nineteen thirties, it would be worth keeping the movement going. But I feel this the more strongly because I believe that sooner or later we will be faced with a similar situation and that total renunciation of the use of force by some one nation may then be the only way to avert catastrophe.

Pacifism is revolutionary. In present day Australia, it is almost other-worldly. The atmosphere of pacifism is one of social and international justice, tempered by self-sacrifice which goes beyond the limits of justice. This, indeed, is the distinctive element in pacifism. We go so far as to say that for the sake of peace, our country should allow itself to be occupied by a foreign power. It may be said that at the present time, no aggressor is threatening our security, and that we should therefore devote our energies to constructive measures which may prevent the rise of future aggressors. This is a reason why not all of us should take an active part in the work of pacifist bodies; I would be the last to argue that this is the most urgent duty of all pacifists at the present time. But it is the most important task which the pacifist movement, as such, can usefully undertake. Other organisations, exist to stimulate interest in peace questions generally, and to educate public opinion. That is not to say that from time to time, we should not express our views on questions where liberal non-pacifists may see eye to eye with us. For one thing, this will advertise our existence.

Pacifists are always likely to differ about the extent to which their views are in conflict with the explicit assumptions of the rest of the community. Pacifism endangers the standards of the working class, the status of women and much else besides. In stressing the extent to which pacifism is a departure from contemporary beliefs, we dispose, incidentally, of the frequently heard criticism that our propaganda is too intellectual. So long as we are calling in question the beliefs which underly the current social philosophy, it cannot be anything else. Simply arguments and highly emotional appeals presuppose a common background of sentiment and prejudice; no such background is shared by pacifist and non-pacifist. The time for propaganda on a lower level will have arrived if and when pacifism shows signs of becoming a mass movement.

The peculiar difficulty of spreading pacifism arises from the

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K. Rivett
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entitled to define pacifism as I like, and I define pacifism as 'the renunciation of the use of force in international disputes'. In this sense, it is negative. What objectors usually have in mind is that pacifism should form part of a constructive social philosophy -- with which I heartily agree. But it is not, in itself, a social philosophy. It can form part of a number of social philosophies which rest, in turn, on philosophic assumptions that are entirely different. Here we touch on a third difficulty. The pacifist movement, as we all know, embraces all shades of opinion.

This point should not be confused with a fourth one. Pacifism is complex. For most of us it rests on three or four entirely separate grounds, e.g.

1. That war can never be in accord with the spirit and teaching of Jesus Christ;
2. that the nature of the means used to obtain a good end determines the quality of the end achieved;
3. that essential liberties can be defended by non-violent resistance;
4. that if you behave decently to people, they will sooner or later behave decently to you;
5. that from a strictly utilitarian standpoint, the evils of occupation by a foreign power are almost certainly less than those of war.

It is quite consistent to hold one or more of these views without holding the others. And it is usually not possible to present a convincing case for pacifism without introducing several of them.

I have said that pacifist doctrine is revolutionary, negative, heterogeneous, complex and growing. Equally important as regards the means to be used in spreading it is the fact that it is inconclusive. You can't prove beyond all shadow of doubt that pacifism is a wise policy, it's rightness is largely a matter of judgment. I am not referring to the ultimate ethical basis of pacifism or any other political belief, but rather to the fact that such questions as an aggressor's probable reaction to consistently friendly behaviour are matters where intuition is of more help than an attempt to reason from first principles. Every person who becomes and remains a pacifist must face up to these questions. He will have doubts and difficulties which can only be removed after the fullest possible discussion with a convinced pacifist. The personal factor is therefore unusually important in the spreading of pacifist views.

In stressing the importance of the personal factor, I am not repeating the somewhat exaggerated truism that a radical movement is judged by its supporters. Yet to advocate pacifist views in a responsible and useful way does call for exceptional qualities

The above remarks are based on the first part of a memorandum which I submitted to Federal Council in April '46.

Mrs. B. Meridith agrees that pacifists can only unite on a negative basis.

Rev. P.S. Lawrence thinks that we do not face the matter of aggression fairly enough.

Miss Eleanor Moore doubts whether self-sacrifice is the distinctive element in pacifism. I should perhaps have said that while pacifism is not necessarily a policy of sacrifice, it involves risks and sacrifices which no other movement is prepared to advocate.

Mr. Rawson Deans stresses the importance of "maintaining" and working for equal human rights for all peoples". Needless to say, we

hold that policies based on this promise would avoid the situation arising of 'our country being occupied by a foreign power'. Do we really believe that? I personally do not.

Mr. Herbert Crossland says that for him pacifism and Christianity are the same thing, therefore pacifism cannot be negative. The only point at issue here is how far it is possible to discuss pacifism without raising other issues. I would not care to speak about it without doing so, but I would not expect a listener who shared my pacifism to share necessarily the whole of my social philosophy.

The late Mr. Warnock disagreed with my statement that our propaganda should not be less 'intellectual'. If a more popular approach can be made successfully, well and good. But the two 'popular' books on pacifism - Sheppard's "We Say No" and Milne's "Peace With Honour" - seem to me to be failures.

Though this speech has been mainly critical, I should like to conclude by expressing faith and pride in the pacifist movement. It is not accidental that it is strong in proportion to the political wisdom of the country concerned - stronger in Denmark than anywhere else in the world, stronger in New Zealand than in the other Dominions. We should remember, however, that a minority can dissent from the rest of the community either because it is intellectually creative or simply because it ignores relevant facts. The task of the pacifist movement is to be so realistic that it raises the whole level on which these questions are discussed, and meets the ruthless logic of total war with a counter logic equally ruthless, but based on a wider view of the facts and on nobler assumptions.

QUESTIONS.

Miss E. MOORE: Mr. Rivett said that pacifism was a potential risk to women and children and he gave an instance of what he thought. I noted he said in Denmark Pacifism was stronger than anywhere else in the world. I understand the general level of civic life there is particularly high so that though the two may not be cause and effect, they may exist together.

Mr. RIVETT: I certainly think that belief in Pacifist doctrines and respect for the equality of women are likely to go together. I meant there might be a danger if the country were occupied by a government like the government of Nazi Germany, which was definitely opposed to the equality of women. As regards the threat to the working class, I think that is implicit in the fact that the aggressor would be in a position to exploit the pacifist nation subject to the limits which always exist on the use of force for economic purposes. The fall in the standard of life might be especially great in the case of countries like Australia which, relative to other countries, is under populated.

Miss MOORE: That seems to assume that Pacifism and defeat in war are the same thing.

Mr. RIVETT: An occupation not resisted is not the same as a military defeat.

Mr. T. McAUGHTRIE: What do you mean when you say Pacifism is necessarily negative?

Mr. RIVETT: The most useful definition of Pacifism seems to me to be the renunciation of the use of force in international disputes. It is negative in the sense that its aim is to avoid evils rather than create any positive good. It cannot make the same appeal as social philosophies which centre everything on the achievement of a concrete Utopia. If a nation turns pacifist, it runs a very grave risk of a permanent occupation by some foreign power. This might not apply.