

# The Demise of the Nuclear Disarmament Party

Edward St. John was one of the many Conference delegates who walked out of the Melbourne Conference of the NDP. Mr. St. John contributes another viewpoint of the circumstances and, in so doing, touches on some of the complexities experienced by groups attempting new ways to achieve social change through the political process.

The recent events in Melbourne were very unfortunate, and in the short term damaging to the peace movement in Australia.

But let me begin by saying that I believe the NDP had undoubtedly served a very useful purpose as the first clear political expression of the Australian peace movement, and (thanks to the peace movement) achieved a near-miracle in the 1984 campaign. Nuclear disarmament became the dominant issue in that campaign.

The split was of course a direct result of the machinations of the Socialist Workers Party, a communist party whose principle objective is world revolution, and which views parliamentary democracy with unqualified contempt. I described the SWP in these terms in a paper which was made available for the Melbourne Conference, replete with quotations from an official SWP publication, which fully supported my description of it. I believe in calling a spade a spade; if *that* is what some like to call "red-baiting" or "McCarthyism", they may do so; for myself, I believe it to be necessary and proper to be quite explicit about such matters.

Once it became apparent (as it did, following the election) that the SWP was making a major and moderately successful effort to assert itself prominently in the affairs of the NDP, some sort of split became inevitable. Internally, the SWP was an organised, parasitic minority bent on gaining factional advantage, the better to pursue *its* objectives within the host body; externally, the SWP presence in our midst, once

it became known, was calculated to rob us of support from "middle Australia" which was essential to our aspirations. Either they had to go, or we had to leave.

It is of course regrettable in many ways that the split had to take the form of a walkout by the perceived leaders, and many others, including myself. For one thing, this meant that the SWP was left with the name, which had become justly famous, and had acquired a certain *cachet*.

Yet the walkout did offer the great advantage of demonstrating once and for all that those who walked out were *not* "communist dupes", to be manipulated by the extreme left (the time-worn jibe against the peace movement).

And I personally doubt whether the walkout was any less desirable than the other kind of split, involving a long-drawn out battle for a proscription clause and, if necessary, identification and expulsion of such SWP members as might still have declined to leave.

May I say two things for the record at this point. First, that I had resigned from the Liberal Party in 1969, and have not been a member of a political party since then, except for my short-lived membership in the NDP, from which I resigned following the walkout. Second, that I was not the organiser or leader of the walkout, as appears to be suggested in some quarters. But I certainly joined in the decision (made in Melbourne) to take that

course of action, as being the best available in the circumstances.

I personally saw no reason why we should not rise again like the proverbial phoenix from the ashes — the spirit of the old NDP, with a new name of course, (to distinguish it from the old NDP, in which the SWP would be paramount), but still clinging to the "single issue", and with a clause proscribing any member of another political party from membership in the new party.

I called upon those who had walked out to form themselves, there and then, in Melbourne, into such a new party. It was, I thought, (and still think) an historic opportunity, not to be missed. But I gained no overt support for this move at the time. Jo Vallentine and Peter Garrett were against it. It seems that many of those who walked out were in a state of shock; it now appears that a majority of those people and their supporters throughout Australia do want to see a new political party, but still in what they regard as due season — not immediately.

These people are now getting together in a new organisation (*not* a political party, at least for the time being), Peace and Nuclear Disarmament Action (PANDA) which will support Senator Jo Vallentine, and from which, apparently, members of any political party will be excluded.

What distinguished the NDP from the multitude of peace groups was its nature as a political party, putting up candidates for Parliament, and giving political expression to the aspirations of the peace groups which were burgeoning throughout Australia. What distinguished it, notably, from other political parties in general, and from the Australian Democrats in particular, was the single issue,

which I believe was its great strength — compelling a concentration of attention and effort on the foremost issue of our day, to which everything else is secondary and is indeed doomed to be *meaningless* unless the nuclear arms race can be brought to a halt.

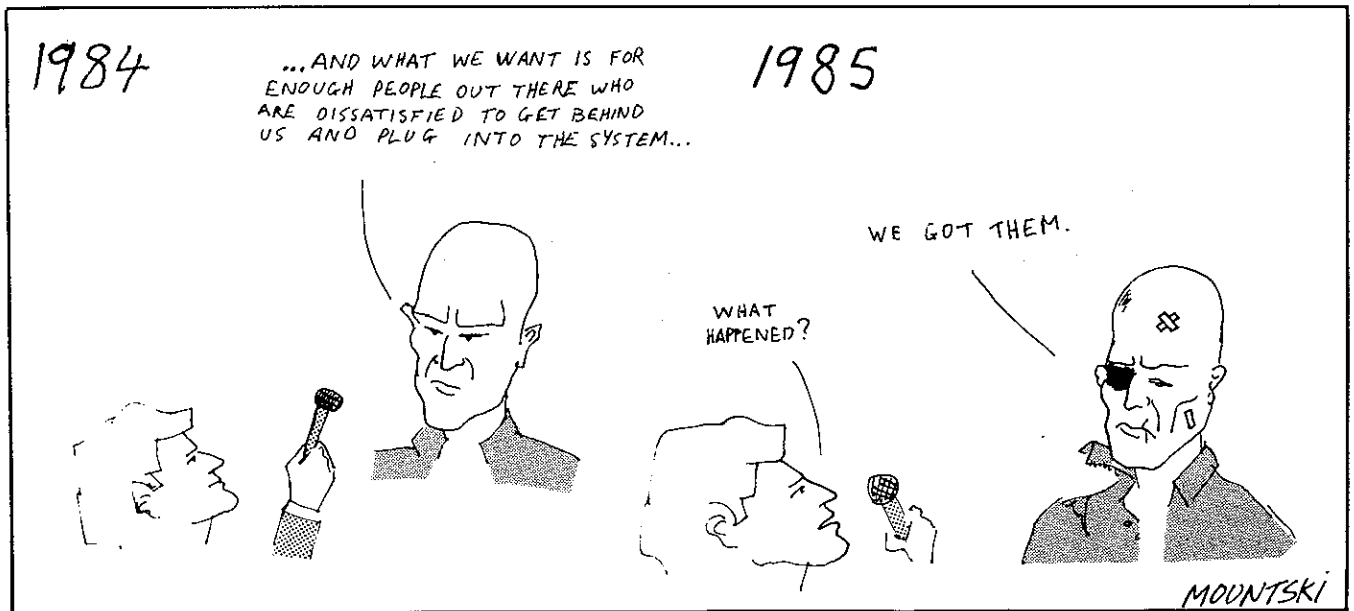
I am joining PANDA, but to be frank, the sooner the new political party can be formed the better I shall be pleased. To me that is the only way forward.

What went wrong with the old NDP? It was something more than the SWP, in itself. Speaking largely from a New South Wales perspective (which is not necessarily representative of the whole of Australia) I would have to say that in my view — which could, I suppose, be biased in favour of the professionalism to which I am accustomed — the old NDP failed partly also because of its political naivete. And I am not referring simply to naivete about communists. There was a great wave of enthusiasm, and lots of wonderful people,

to say that we were a bunch of amateurs; nay, worse, from my point of view (which could be distorted, as I say) there was almost a *cult* of amateurism. This became more and more obvious during the period after the campaign.

I believe in effective, democratic leadership; “they” distrusted leadership, and believed in “grass roots” democracy. I believe in orderly meetings with majority votes where necessary, chaired by persons experienced in such things; they preferred “consensus” and rotating “facilitators”. I believe there must be minutes, and while I chaired the meetings, minutes were duly kept and confirmed. This was not always the case later. When it came to constitution-drafting, I should have preferred to see them call in professional help (or avail themselves of mine, which would have been freely given) and to rely on precedents, which could be adapted to suit the specific needs of the NDP; but they

came blurred to the point of extinction. I believed in a pyramidal structure for the NDP throughout Australia — with local branches, regional or electorate groupings, State branches and a national body, along the lines of all other political parties. But they believed in “non-hierarchical structures.” (In a country as big as Australia I don’t see how democratic government of any national body can be achieved *without* what they call a hierarchical structure!) Because of the lack of “hierarchical structure” and a proper constitution, the New South Wales Branch had been run largely through big long Sunday meetings consisting of anyone who came along. Even the committee meetings, as I have said, were too large, and open to all and sundry; anyhow, they distrusted “the committee” on principle, and preferred to have matters decided by the Sunday meetings, which were not confined, as I believe they should



young and old, including many of whom I became very fond, and, of course, some very able and intelligent people. Peter Garrett, it goes without saying, was an excellent candidate. Despite our lack of experience we ran a great campaign (through a committee elected on my initiative at the very first meeting I attended). Yet when all that is said, it remains true

preferred to “do their own thing”, and attempted to work it out for themselves through interminable meetings. They believed that anyone should be free to attend any meeting, and to speak, even though not elected to the body concerned; Committee meetings became overlarge and the distinction between those qualified to vote and those not so qualified be-

have been, to matters of policy.

There were no doubt some who shared my very “old-fashioned” ideas as to how things should be run, but they were not very evident. “They” refers to the general body of activists; maybe they were not entirely representative of the mass of people who voted for

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