



12. how effective are peace movements?

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On 10 July 1997 Bob Overy made a presentation about the effectiveness - or otherwise - of peace movements. It was based on a booklet he had published in the early 1980s which members of the group read, or re-read, prior to the meeting. Present were: Christina Arber, John Brierley, Howard Clark, Annie Harrison, Yolanda Juarros Barcenilla, Bob Overy, Michael Randle, Carol Rank, Andrew Rigby.

Presentation - [Bob Overy](#) [2]

Bob explained that he had written the original text with that title back in 1980-81 while he was doing his Ph.D at Peace Studies. It had subsequently been published as a booklet in 1982 by a Canadian publisher, who had, however, added ideas of his own to the Preface and Postscript - some of which Bob did not even agree with! - and somewhat revamped it with the second UN Special Session on Disarmament in mind. But Bob was mainly responsible for the middle bit. He was not planning to use the analysis he had made some 15 years ago to talk about the present. Instead he would summarise the main points, and it would be up to the group to consider whether or not it provided any useful ways of looking at today's movements and issues.

The catalyst for the study was a review by A.J.P. Taylor, eminent historian and member of CND Executive, of a book by the war historian, Michael Howard. Taylor, concurring with the author's view, said that the attempt to abolish war was a vain and useless enterprise, but that he was proud to be associated with the peace movement when it was trying to stop particular wars. Bob felt he was wrong. He was delighted to be with Taylor in trying to stop particular wars but he also did believe that we could abolish war. That had always been his position as a pacifist. Some pacifists seem to have lost sight of that aim and reduced and settled for being pacifists rather than part of a movement to abolish war.

That was his starting point. But how could we abolish war? He didn't know the answer to that. But he was still committed to being part of a movement that had abolition as its goal. And even if we couldn't do it, that was still what he was committed to. So he had begun to consider the whole question of effectiveness and what one's aims were. One wanted to be effective, but even if one could not be effective one still had to do what one was doing. That brought in the moral and idealistic dimensions, and for some the spiritual dimension. What was the meaning of each action that we took? We wanted to be judged on effectiveness criteria, but for many of us, perhaps for most of us if we were truthful, you could take away the effectiveness criteria and we would still carry on.

Taylor had distinguished between movements to abolish war and movements to abolish particular wars. Bob decided that there was a third category - namely movements to stop particular aspects of war. Campaigns against nuclear weapons, against the arms trade, against landmines and so forth fell into this category. In the introduction to his booklet he argued that if we did break down peace movements in this way we could begin to look at their aims and effectiveness. It was fairly obvious that a movement to abolish all war was likely to have longer-range objectives and was likely to encompass a much broader range of views, and was therefore in the world's view be much less likely to be effective, certainly in the short run, than a movement which was out to stop a particular war. The latter was more closely engaged with the political process, more pragmatically involved in trying to stop something in the here and now. Perhaps, therefore, it had to be judged by stricter criteria. In between there were the campaigns against particular aspects of war, such as CND, which had moved beyond, or away from seeking to abolish all war to trying to be effective within a particular area.

The Committee of 100, or one part of it, emerged from a critique of the Peace Pledge Union that their attempt to abolish all war, and pacifism in terms of all types of weapons, was perhaps too ambitious or did not provide sufficient focus, and the conviction that there needed to be a particular focus on nuclear weapons. Some of us had devoted a lot of our lives to campaigning for the abolition of nuclear weapons. This did not mean that we were not pacifists but that we had concentrated our attention on these weapons because we felt we could be more effective by doing so - and he thought that had proved to be the case. So he tried to break down the objectives in terms of



long-range as against short-range, but also breadth of vision as against narrowness of vision, and also to some extent immediacy.

However, he decided that this wasn't enough. There were other dimensions he wanted to bring to bear on the question of effectiveness. The next one had been current in the School of Peace Studies when he was there and was based on the work of Adam Curle. It was a critique of the fact that peace movements were negative. They were always going out and saying no to things, but would not get anywhere unless they learned to be positive. They had to say what they were for, and develop and build it. This was so blindingly obvious. We could not continually be making statements about what was wrong since it meant that the terms of the argument were all the time being determined by the powers that be who were generating the situations we objected to. If we were trying to seize the time and create a different type of politics then simply being opposed was not a sensible way forward. This other positive dimension was strongly argued for within the School of Peace Studies and more generally within the peace movement in the late '60s, the time of flower-power and the flourishing of alternatives.

Peace Studies in the 1970s tried to develop in a more academic way the points that had come out of the 1960s and 1970s. There was the idea that we had to develop positive peace, not only in terms of the individual who had to develop the positive, the 'light within', but more particularly in terms of generating a social climate within the groups you were in and more widely within society. Bob thought there was an enormous confusion within the School of Peace Studies where a lot of people were trying to say that everything that was going in the right direction was part of the peace movement - whether civil liberties, human rights, whatever. We were all part of one big movement, namely the peace movement. He felt this was dangerous because it was so wishy-washy.

What he had done in the booklet - which he felt was inadequate but the best he could do - was to define peace movements from a negative point of view. Historically peace movements have been 'anti', and the classification he was using was 'anti' - the abolition of war, the abolition of certain aspects of war, the attempt to stop particular wars. On the other hand - and this was where there was a weakness in the analysis - people involved in peace movements inevitably became involved in all sorts of other things. So you had the concerns of peace movements which were much broader.

There were many examples. He pointed in the booklet to prison reform, or living in communes. There were all sorts of things that people experienced through being involved in the peace movement which then led them on to be interested and involved in other issues and activities. What he was trying to say - though it was not argued adequately in the booklet - was that the peace movement actually did have to open out and expand those creative, positive areas in a coherent way. It had failed as yet to do that, and it wasn't until it succeeded in doing so that it would be able to achieve its larger goal.

As he went through case studies - of which there were quite a few in the text - he warmed to the idea that the effective movements were the ones which were broadening out and sending off ripples in all directions. In this way you would begin to build a mass movement which had many centres of activity and all sorts of focal points that no-one really controlled. There was no longer one source of initiatives but dozens or hundreds or thousands.

The third main thing was that he realised was that it was necessary to look at the peace movement's relationship to government. All peace movements to a greater or lesser extent existed in opposition to government. He identified four types: the pressure group, the mass movement of protest, the permanent minority, and the revolutionary movement. They were, he noted, slightly different categories.

The pressure group was fairly obvious, and there were many of them. It was the outfit that was focussed fairly narrowly - like CND in the past though perhaps less so now. You attempted to bring together all the best ideas and the best information related to the issue, identifying people within the system at levels of power who could be used on your side or could be levered or manipulated to be on your side. Your effectiveness was achieved through that kind of work. So you were quite close to the political system.

The mass movement of protest could develop out of the pressure group when it received much wider support and could no longer control what was being done in its name. The booklet was in fact partly about how CND lost control of what it was generating. That was when the revolutionary possibilities begin to develop. There could also be major conflict in the streets and bust-ups with the government. You might even succeed in forcing the government in some way to back down, or at any rate to raise the issue and spread awareness of it more generally. You were not simply focussing narrowly on public opinion through a few specialists and through people writing letters, but were generating protests and actions all over the place. This could lead politicians to feel that the movement might



represent some sort of threat to them, or alternatively might provide an opportunity for them to build a new constituency - in which case they might shift their position. Mass movement protests were very interesting but did not happen often.

The notion of the permanent minority Bob had got from a Canadian anarchist called Kingsley Widmore writing in the excellent journal *Anarchy* edited by Colin Ward in the 1960s. He and people like Paul Goodman and others looked at the actual practice of anarchism rather than the theory of anarchism and said that although anarchism was about making total revolution, in practice what it did was to make revolutions in specific areas thereby achieving libertarian break-throughs. Libertarian education would be one example where anarchism has had an important impact, and perhaps sexual freedom would be another. Widmore talked about revolutions that were achieved in the framework and context of our current society rather than the revolution which transforms everything. It was more a cultural thing where we made specific important gains within society as it is which were anarchistic in their tendency. This meant that we were not actually changing the world but were a permanent minority with a set of ideas which were influential in different areas at certain times. He thought that was a pretty good description of what a lot of us actually did, even though it was not what we would like to be doing.

Finally there was the revolutionary movement. Here he was picking up on *Peace News* a la Howard Clark, and the Movement for a New Society in the United States which had come out of all the people who had been influenced by Gandhi and, from the 1940s onwards, were arguing for nonviolent revolution. Their argument was that pacifism was far too narrow and that the only sensible way to achieve the goal of pacifism, the abolition of war, was to completely revolutionise our society by building a society that could sustain peace.

To sum up, he used three main parameters. First, the different types of opposition to war. Second, the broad peace movement as against the narrow peace movement, or the positive idea of the peace movement as against the negative one. Third, where one stood in relation to governments and in relation to the ability to make major changes.

He then considered particular movements and campaigns. First the movements to eliminate war - the Peace Pledge Union, Pax Christi, Quakers, FoR which were pretty good examples of permanent minorities. Then he looked at movements to stop particular aspects of war including the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament with all the problems and complexities it encountered trying to maintain a broad coalition and hold together so many people with differing perspectives. The booklet looked briefly at the Campaign Against the Arms Trade and the historical peculiarity of the Lucas Aerospace campaign where the workers in the company made an analysis of their plant and how it could be converted to peaceful uses. It was almost an anachronism - something that happened and had now gone away again. It was developing in other ways but was less relevant than some of the other things.

Bob then read a passage from the booklet about the single-issue campaign:

The single-issue campaigns on particular aspects of war, by virtue of their specific focus and the mass of factual material and pragmatic analysis which they bring to bear to reinforce a basic moral commitment, seem to be the most effective way of campaigning open to peace groups in normal times. They are effective in breaking through the narrow confines of what is 'accepted political debate' in our parliaments and congresses and the media. They are also effective, because of the media attention they can command, in bringing the issues of militarism and insanely destructive weaponry before the public and so developing a wider consciousness about the problem of war.

Where they fall down, as we have seen, is first in failing to develop an adequate analysis and programme for the abolition of war itself and, second, in managing the sectarian political tensions pushing and pulling in different directions when, on occasions, the single-issue pressure group becomes the focus for a broad based mass movement of protest.

That was the Overy verdict on CND-type campaigns! But then where he got really excited was in considering the movements to stop particular wars. He looked to the Committee of 100 as a sort of precursor of a potentially revolutionary movement. Then he looked at the anti-Vietnam war movement and got still more excited because it was so extraordinary, especially in America where it brought so many different forces at all levels of the society together. He then considered the Northern Ireland Peace People and provided probably the best apologia for them you could find. He actually demonstrated that they were trying to develop a nonviolent revolution and that it was in some ways a coherent analysis. As he wrote (p.46):



The great breakthrough which the Peace People promised to achieve in 1976, and perhaps partially achieved, was based on three related factors: first, a direct attack on violence and sectarianism in working-class areas; second, a distance from the British power which hinted at a politics of the middle-ground which was not compromised by British political self-interestedness; and third, an attack on the established political institutions as being incapable of resolving the problems of Northern Ireland.

That was, at its best, what the Peace People were about. He was not saying they achieved that, but particularly that last point was profound. It really was the case that the established political institutions were incapable of resolving the problems of Northern Ireland

In this section he was beginning to argue that the paradox was that it was the movements against particular wars which had generated the mass movements. These had then brought together coalitions of all sorts of people, and actually were the most positive movements. Within them the culture, and the larger strategy to end all war, could be developed.

NARP Discussion

Dialectic between situation and movement

Andrew questioned Bob's contention that it was single-issue campaigns against particular wars that we could say by some criteria were effective. In his view it was public concern about specific wars that fed into peace movements – for example in the case of the Vietnam war. The movements might then focus that concern by organising protests and public meetings and so forth, but they did not create it in the first instance.

Howard thought it was a difficult to fit the anti-Euromissiles campaign of the 1980s into Bob's framework. You could say it was a movement against an aspect of war but people like Edward Thompson envisaged it as a movement against a structure - the Cold War. Mary Kaldor, too, talked about 'the imaginary war' - neither a particular war nor an aspect of war. The campaign was much closer in character to a movement for the abolition of war. Thompson in particular with his vision of living as if borders had ceased to exist, and his emphasis on detente from below was offering something very different from earlier campaigns. Howard would say, in relation to Andrew's point, that this was a case in which a movement raised the concern, and found allies in the media. The movement was driven partly by fear but also by vision, particularly internationally.

Bob responded that in Britain the fear was very real. In the 1960s it was fear of Mutual Assured Destruction that had generated the peace movement; in the 1980s, it was the fear that the deployment of cruise and Pershing missiles meant that we were going to have a short-range nuclear war in Europe where America would remain unscathed and we would all get blown to bits.

Howard said there was a dialectic between the situation and the movement. He did not think that Reagan and Thatcher created the movement in the early 80s. CND was already on the up before Thatcher was elected. The whistle-blowing documentaries at the beginning of the 80s were made because there was concern and an audience for the programmes. You needed a vigilant movement to highlight the issues and push people into saying things about the situation

Michael, agreed. When Hugh Brock and the small group around him in Operation Gandhi and the Nonviolent Resistance Group organised demonstrations at Aldermaston in 1952 and 1953 they never had more than a coachload of demonstrators. But when, again on the initiative of Hugh and others in the earlier group, the Direct Action Committee Against Nuclear War organised a four-day march to Aldermaston at Easter 1958, it attracted thousands. It was the situation which had changed by then with Suez and Hungary, and a lot of things on the move. The situation was important, plus some people having a certain vision and sticking at it during the lean years.

CND – single issue campaign or broad movement?

Michael said that he felt to describe the nuclear disarmament movement, not just CND but the whole movement, as



a single issue movement against particular weapons did not do it justice. Nuclear weapons changed the nature of war and threatened total destruction. We had been afraid, and we were right to be afraid. But there was also an intense moral conviction. You might believe certain kinds of wars were justified in particular circumstances, but nuclear war was totally unacceptable. The anti-nuclear movement was therefore somewhat different from campaigns against particular weapons and needed to be in a category by itself. Bob said that Bruce Kent of CND argued that the basic issue was genocidal weapons and warfare that involved total annihilation. However, it was not the weapon as such but the structures that could deliver that level of annihilation that we were opposed to.

Howard said that CND in the 1980s absolutely failed to address that question of structures. Unlike the movement of the '60s or '50s, it got stuck on the particular weapons. The earlier movement had had an incredible impact on British society, whereas the movement of the '80s got more people going into the Labour Party and government. It was incredible how many MPs were former members of CND. The British peace movement failed to treat nuclear weapons in terms of international relations. CND as an organisation had been deadlocked on international questions, so that aspect had to be taken up by European Nuclear Disarmament (END) which was regarded as an intellectual fringe. When CND invoked an international argument it tended to be a rather spurious one – good for a slogan but not very deep. Bob said Howard's remarks tended to confirm his contention that CND was against a particular weapons system rather than what Michael was saying it was in the '60s, namely a much larger movement against the annihilation of the species.

Howard said that in the '80s Greenham in this country corresponded exactly to what Michael was saying, whereas CND as an organisation was too narrow, focussing on cruise missiles (Ground Launched Cruise Missiles) and Pershing II ballistic missiles. Carol said if you accepted Bob's thesis you could see why that would be the case - the more narrow you were the more effective you could be. So people thought - 'Let's start with something we can have an effect on, a particular weapons system. Get people to understand it and what money was going into it, and focus on that'. It was often difficult from a campaigning point of view to put across the wider aspect.

Annie wondered how far Bob's model would apply to the environmental movement. The remit of Friends of the Earth (FoE), for example was not narrow in the sense that CND's was. They were looking at a huge range of issues, yet had been relatively effective both in changing the culture and in having some impact on the policies of governments. Carol commented that although their goals were broad, they also ran campaigns on specific issues.

Andrew said that new types of movement, had emerged since Bob wrote his piece. We were also moving beyond his narrow definition of peace. It was true that in the '80s the focus was principally on cruise and Pershing, but as people became involved and started an educational process, a culture developed. Certainly in Bradford there was a strong cultural element. You ended up being with people you enjoyed being with and there was a social as well as a movement dimension.

Defining Peace Movements as 'pro' or 'anti'

Howard thought the 'anti' charge against the peace movements was unfair. They had put a great deal of energy, for example, into peace education work, and not in a narrow anti-war sense but focussing on cooperation, alternative ways of resolving conflict, and other constructive elements. Bob said he thought peace education held out great promise but that there had been a huge failure to realise that promise, at least in this country. The promise was that we could somehow get peace education into schools. One of the key aims in the '70s and '80s on which a large amount of work had been done was to try to get it onto the national curriculum and get teachers to use it. But the effort had failed.

Andrew said this was overstating things. Bob's own job as Emergency Planning Officer in Leeds City Council came out of that public concern in the '80s; likewise with peace education. Bob said he was talking about effectiveness not making a moral judgement. He had tried unsuccessfully to promote peace education in Leeds City Council, but without success. Peace education was a key dimension of achieving the goal of abolishing war, but the objective circumstances were hindering its development within the institutions of this country. Carol agreed that peace education as such had largely disappeared, but thought that perhaps this was because a lot of people identified it with anti-nuclear weapons education. It was seen as indoctrination, and about promoting a particular political perspective. Therefore people started calling it other things such as development education, world studies, conflict resolution. Peace education was not dead - it was going on in different forms. But as a set curriculum it was dead.



Yolanda said the peace movement in Spain was very young but it did have global concerns. It was concerned about not only about wars and armies, but about roads, the position of women, sexual options. But was this very different from what we in Britain had experienced twenty years ago? Was there something new or were we on a kind of wheel on which we kept going round and round rather than going forward? She found it difficult to make a judgement about this in relation to large movements. With young movements such as those in Turkey, or Croatia or Spain, you could see the changes. She might not always agree with what was going on, but at least there was the pleasure of seeing things go in a different direction. Still she was not sure if something really different was taking place or if the movements were simply repeating the mistakes of earlier ones. She thought there probably was a greater interest now in nonviolence amongst movements like the squatters. Ten years ago she had visited the squatters in Berlin who did not consider the question of violence or nonviolence. But now in Madrid there were new squatter groups - people who had set up what they called 'social centres' rather than squats and planned to give life to the areas where they had occupied houses.

Goals and processes

Howard said War Resisters' International had just agreed a new statement of principles which stressed the need to create a peace culture. That was moving them from a purely anti position. Their programme entitled Nonviolence and Social Empowerment was looking at effectiveness not in terms of ultimate goals but in terms of empowerment at the personal, group and social levels, and of the social processes you were trying to change.

Christina said it was important to recognize the stages of conflict and to deal with it at an early point. In a somewhat simplistic model, conflict resolution theory identified four stages. First, people began to have very negative images of one another; second, they stopped talking; third they began threatening one another; finally they attacked one another with weapons. Bob regarded this model of eliminating war by building out from the processes by which we engaged with each other as positive, though whether historically we were moving in that direction he was not sure. He also found the anti-roads movement exciting. Some of us had devoted much of our lives to fighting against things which many people found difficult to become involved with because they were so far removed from their ordinary lives. The building of more and more roads touched people more directly and if you could show that to stop this process you had to oppose the development of society in a particular direction, the road protests became very important.

Christina wondered if the various movements had brought us nearer to the pacifist goal of abolishing war. Sometimes it seemed we abolished one aspect of war, or brought a particular war to an end, only to be faced with new wars and new weapons. Her own feeling was that we had made progress. If peace movements became ever broader and were not just permanent minorities or appealing to a minority section, she felt that one day we arrive at a situation where the majority of people would accept that the goal should be to abolish war rather than taking A.J.P.Taylor's view that this was impossible. She felt hopeful, but did not know if her optimism was supported by the evidence

Annie said she was still doubtful if overall we were making progress. Obviously it was a step forward that some of the big structures of slavery had been dismantled, but it seemed as though for every little gain we made there were more serious setbacks. John said he too had this sense at times. It was like the Greek myth of the Hydra - for every head you cut off several more grew in its place. Perhaps there was today a greater willingness to hold back from going to war, but on the other hand new military technologies were being developed at an increasing rate, technologies to conduct information wars, manipulate the media, knock out the opponent's computer systems, and so forth. The military were not going to announce these things as they did in the past because they had learnt from experience that this would lead people to mobilise to oppose them. It was difficult to know how to oppose these new developments. It was much easier with nuclear weapons because their effect was so apparent. It was possible we could be going into a very unstable period. Howard said the important thing was not countering the weapons systems but changing structures and relationships. There now existed an enormous paraphernalia to control weapons which you could say was an achievement of 20th century peace thinking - like the UN Registry of Conventional Arms.

Carol asked John if he thought there had been progress in terms of people's attitudes towards nuclear weapons. He replied that the response to the French nuclear tests in the Pacific indicated that there had been. Nobody would have predicted the worldwide opposition they generated. Events like made you aware how much things had changed. Judging effectiveness was difficult because you had specific aims around which you focussed your



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campaigns. Usually you didn't achieve them, but in the process you achieved things you had not expected.

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