

# Disarmament Diplomacy

Issue No. 13, February - March 1997

## The Abolition of War:

### The Politics of Realistic Utopianism

by Bruce Kent

#### Introduction

Dreaming dreams and sharing visions is an important part of social progress. If the mountain top is not occasionally visible, the uphill slog gets rather discouraging.

From time to time people distinguished in the field of arms control and disarmament remind us that the ultimate objective of all such work ought to be the abolition of war. President Eisenhower in 1956 looked forward to the day when antagonists would realise that, because of the unwinnable nature of modern war, the only place to settle disputes would be at the conference table.

After his 1996 Nobel award, Professor Joseph Rotblat once more pointed to abolition as the ultimate goal. Because of the available means of mass destruction we have the choice once put in the Russell-Einstein manifesto: survival or extinction. Positively, it said: "To abolish war we need to create a new mind-set. We have to convey to the peoples of the world the message that the safeguarding of our common property - humankind - calls for developing in each of us a new loyalty, a loyalty to mankind." This is today realistic utopianism.

That there has been progress in the development of a sense of global citizenship is clear. Organisationally it is expressed by movements like Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and the World Development Movement. People are concerned about rainforests far away, about the possible extinction of whole species of creation, and about the economic exploitation of the underdeveloped world. Nuclear tests in the Pacific aroused enormous indignation amongst people thousands of miles away.

Negatively we also move towards becoming an economic global village in which international corporations and unknown financiers make more significant decisions than do most national governments. Unhappily the ironing out of human variety goes on constantly. International television is the great leveller of culture - and most of the levelling is in a downwards direction.

Ideas about security are also becoming more global. Sir Michael Quinlan and other proponents of peace through nuclear deterrence are now clearly on the international defensive. The Vatican, for instance, has at last declared that "nuclear deterrence prevents genuine nuclear disarmament...it is a fundamental obstacle to achieving a new age of global security." The sacred cow of British politics, the "independent" British deterrent, is starting to look both expensive and useless, though no mainstream politician yet dares to

say so. Changed thinking is clearly on the way when a scientist of the stature of Sir Michael Atiyah, President of the Royal Society, can say:

"I believe history will show that the insistence on a UK nuclear capability was fundamentally misguided, a total waste of resources and a significant factor in our relative economic decline over the past fifty years."

However, it is a long leap from the challenge to a particular weapons system to the dream that one day we might abolish war. Or is it?

Realising the dream: intellectual and campaigning priorities

One of the pleasures of reading the late Barbara Ward, economist and peacemaker, is that her utopianism always had very down-to-earth roots. She frequently drew a comparison between national and global security:

"All the procedures proposed for disarmament, the elimination of private control over arms, the subsidisation of police forces, courts of law, mediation, arbitration, and all other methods of settling disputes peacefully are in fact practised every day within domestic society."

It is of course easier to understand and accept what she means from the perspective of peaceful Sussex rather than from of civil-war-torn El Salvador. Despite her optimism, most of the wars of today are within rather than between different societies. Her message is nevertheless a strong one. War will not be abolished by dreaming about its abolition, but by looking at its causes and building counter-forces and effective institutions.

In this task onion-peeling begins. Where to start? It is easy enough to point to the arms trade and to congratulate ourselves that some start has been made with a UN Register. But behind the arms trade lies the pressure of an economic system of profit and jobs. And behind that system there is a philosophy which seems to make no one responsible for anything. The Scott Report, investigating the sale of British arms to Iraq, is full of examples of people who accept no personal responsibility for their actions. As Sir Richard Ellis, one-time head of the Defence Sales Organisation, once said:

"The Government decides the markets: I help to supply them. I lose no sleep whatever on the moral issue: the morality lies with the user."

There are many such difficult pieces, both large and small, which make up the jig-saw of war. They range from distorted religion and extreme nationalism through to economic injustice and scientific amorality. They include the cult of military glory and the urge to conform to the respectable normality of the day.

In domestic society in some parts of the world, including our own, we have indeed built up the institutions of order ranging from police forces to courts of law. In Britain, at least, the ownership of guns for personal self-defence is highly unusual. At world level there are many gaps. We do not yet have a permanent criminal court and, despite the clear intention of the UN Charter, security is still seen to be a matter for individual States rather than for the collective community. The centrepiece of international thinking remains the sovereign State rather than the global citizen. In financial terms we spend at least one hundred times more on war and its supporting institutions than we do on all the global agencies and structures of the United Nations.

So is the abolition of war then an impossible ideal, granted the obstacles in the way? Perhaps we should confine ourselves to trying to limit war's occurrence and ameliorate its effects. I hope not. Every step in the direction of social progress in Britain, from the abolition of the slave trade to the provision of universal old age pensions, has been looked on in the past by the sensible people of the day as being quite unrealistic. Remedial work is entirely desirable. If Lady Diana, the international landmines campaign, and the Canadian Government can achieve a total ban, so much the better. But we do not have to stop there.

In the November 1996 issue of Disarmament Diplomacy, Ian Black of The Guardian urged the need for public debate on nuclear weapon issues: "It is time to move discussion out of the think-tanks and into the streets..." Some of us have been trying to do just that for decades. We have faced hostile political opinion, press indifference and misrepresentation, and public paranoia. There were even times when we felt that we were facing official insanity.

Minds boggled when the Foreign Office told us that accidental nuclear war was "not a possibility." They boggled again when Colin Grey, of the US National Security Council, explained that "the United States must possess the ability to wage nuclear war rationally." There was little capability of any further boggling when a distinguished Field-Marshal, explaining the complexities of Flexible Response, mentioned that the process might indeed involve blowing up the world, but "in a graduated, controlled way."

Getting ideas out "into the streets" can be a hazardous operation. It would be foolish not to recognise how powerful are the established forces which control public opinion. These will only be overcome if a strong partnership is forged between the academic world and those whose role it is to popularise information and to mobilise public opinion. Until public opinion is mobilised, arcane discussions about what does or does not go at international meetings in Geneva or New York will have little bearing on the direction of affairs. When opinion is powerful, as it was for instance in Britain over the poll-tax, political results can follow rapidly.

At the moment there is a gulf between current public opinion and new ideas about security. It suits those in power to keep it so. The "strong defence" card has always been the trump in any politician's hand. It is in their interests to keep nineteenth century notions about security alive and well.

New ideas about security are nevertheless growing. Palme and his report on Common Security may not be known by name, but there is an awareness on the part of many that the planet faces multiple threats: social, economic and environmental. Such awareness was not present, for instance, in 1939 or 1914. The Deputy-Director of the French Institute of International Affairs even claimed recently that "unemployment is the biggest security problem facing the world today."

Nevertheless, for most people security is still seen in terms of military power. The nuclear bomb is still thought to enhance the security of its owner, which makes it quite illogical to deny it to non-owners. There is a massive public ignorance about the aims and workings of international institutions.

After visiting several hundred UK secondary schools over past years, I have to say that in very few of them has the United Nations Charter even be seen, let alone studied. The

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, despite the General Assembly call for it to be distributed in schools, is largely an unknown document. The history of NATO and the Warsaw Pact, let alone the opportunities presented by the OSCE, remain unknown. It is assumed as a dogma that the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the only way to end the Second World War. UNESCO evidence to the contrary, the belief that we humans are doomed to war and violence is widespread. Though there is new environmental and development concern, the obvious links with global demilitarisation are usually not made.

In short our shelves groan with learned disarmament and arms control reports. But they do not reach "the street" in a popular, understandable and motivating form. At the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, world militarism was kept off the agenda despite the appeals of the Director of UNEP. In Britain, the "Agenda 21" process, which has taken hold in many local authority areas, repeats the omission. Organisations with legal charitable status, as the history of the Real World coalition has shown, avoid the issue of militarism since they judge it to be too political. Since the days of the Good Samaritan it has been much easier to raise money for the treatment of symptoms than it has been for the removal of causes.

It is perhaps an indication of the official tendency to want to avoid raising contentious issues that the core budget of the British Council for Education in World Citizenship is now being cut to zero. Government funding once amounted to £110,000. This year it has gone down to £55,000; and in two years, if present plans proceed, the CEWC will get no public core funding at all. Contrast this with the millions spent on public education about the dangers of AIDS and of alcoholism.

And as far as the debate about militarism in my country goes, the party political world does not offer much hope of change. Fractious squabbles break out over the £60 million cost of a new Royal Yacht, yet £15 billion for a new European fighter aircraft designed for Cold War purposes goes through on the nod.

There have been plenty of calls for public education on peace and disarmament issues. Paragraphs 100-108 of the Final Report of the 1978 UN Special Session on Disarmament was meant to commit governments to just such educational programmes. These proposals have had little effect. The World Disarmament Campaign of the United Nations, which for a short time produced excellent popular material, died through lack of funding.

Conclusion: an appeal to academics and activists

The need for a range of non-governmental organisations with political clout has been frequently recognised. No one ever spoke more passionately about the role which they could play in the UN system than the late Erskine Childers who died so tragically last summer. In his Agenda for Peace, Dr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali concludes with the claim that if peace is to become a reality "non-governmental organisations...and the public at large must all be involved." The public at large cannot be involved unless they know what is going on.

My modest proposal is that both academics and activists should now concentrate on raising their sights. What is needed is a Copernican revolution in popular thinking about war. The abolition of war itself must now be put firmly on the world's agenda, utopian though such an idea may now appear to many. All campaigns, debates and discussions on specific issues or specific weapon systems should have that perspective in mind. It is not,

after all, a new idea. The preamble to the United Nations Charter claims that the first priority of the organisation is "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war..."

In Britain, most ideas put forward for celebrating the millennium seem to involve a mixture of bread and circuses. The abolition of war sounds rather more impressive as an aim than most so far suggested. If the world's people do not always agree with each other, and it is unlikely that they ever will, it is not inconceivable that they could find solutions to conflict that do not involve mutual slaughter.

Bruce Kent is a former Chair of the British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND).

© 1998 Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy