

Chair's Report for the 2011 Annual General Meeting

Held on 13th November at the Imperial War Museum, London

This time last year those of us who stayed on for the annual Remembrance Sunday Lecture – as I hope we shall all be able to do today – heard Philippe Sands QC spelling out the illegality of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The Chilcot Enquiry, lacking in teeth though it might be, has nonetheless shed new light on the means by which this country was steered into taking part in that war, and its destructive and disgraceful aftermath. The wheels of such enquiries grind slowly, and we are frequently encouraged to “move on” by those who would like their part in events forgotten. And so we must – as the Movement for the Abolition of War, we should not get bogged down in the issue of whether it's possible to drag Tony Blair and George Bush before the International Criminal Court. But neither should we forget what was done and in what way: we who wish to see an end to the fighting of wars need to learn from the past, even if our leaders are reluctant to do so.

The year just past has seen MAW take part in fewer public events than the previous one –in no new art exhibitions for example - but it has seen us try very hard to reconsider what we should be doing in the current shifting circumstances. While Britain's militaristic culture continues to hold sway in the ceremonial realm – the heir apparent to the throne gets married with the groom and his brother wearing military uniforms festooned with gold braid – people in general are growing less and less comfortable with our nation's actual military adventures overseas. In the last issue of *Abolish War* I quoted a citizen of Wootton Bassett who said on television “I'm 100% behind our troops, and 100% against the war.” So many wish to remain patriotic yet cannot approve of their government's actions. It is this feeling which needs to be harnessed and turned from negative disillusionment to positive peacemaking.

While on the topic of the military here in Britain, I am still grappling with the irony that a Conservative-led coalition government can, it seems, find the nerve to make cuts in military spending. For so many decades it has been taken for granted that Labour equalled left wing equalled a tendency towards disarmament, while Conservative equalled right wing equalled jingoistic militarism and extravagance where our armed forces were concerned. Yet even Trident may not be sacrosanct. Maybe it is sinking in that such cuts are based on realism, not idealism, and have common sense behind them not a lack of patriotism.

But MAW's concerns range far beyond events in the UK: issues of war and peace are global, and are linked to the other global issues of climate change and environment, and, particularly in Africa at the moment, to famine and drought and competition for natural resources. There is also the persistent failure in the Middle East, either to make an acceptable peace deal for Israel and Palestine, or to negotiate with Iran over its nuclear ambitions. Too much of the dialogue that does take place is built on the negative - recriminations for past violence or the threat of potential violence - not enough on positive peacemaking.

In February Lesley Docksey, Martin Birdseye and Brynk Heale together organised a Strategy Day in London for MAW members and other interested parties. It was a sustained attempt both to review and redefine MAW's aims in a clear-sighted way, and to put forward ways to further those aims starting from now. The result was a list

of suggestions for action, but they need the involvement of many of us to take them forward. The most important ones are:

Getting more members actively involved

Making better use of special days, like today, United Nations Day, Armed Forces Day

Publicising more widely the facts about war and peace

Using social networking to do some of the above

Doing more work in schools

All these things are easier said than done, and everybody, not just the Executive Committee, needs to promote them.

March saw a visit to Britain by Norwegian lawyer and author Fredrik Heffermehl, at MAW's invitation. Fredrik's book, *The Nobel Peace Prize: what Nobel really wanted*, looks back to Alfred Nobel's wish to honour and encourage those who worked for disarmament and against militarism. The committee which awards the prize has turned it into one of political convenience instead. Mr. Heffermehl was able to meet people in politics and journalism with whom to share his ideas, and to promote his book.

March 26th saw a big demonstration in London against government cuts in public and welfare spending. This was not a peace march as such, but has relevance to MAW's purpose. As we know, the amount of money and resources poured worldwide into funding wars and developing weapons is in itself obscene, and adds to injustice and fuels conflict in many parts of the world. That is why there was a CND contingent in the march, which I joined, and as we were about to pass under Westminster Bridge, I looked up and saw to my delight MAW's own Bruce Kent and Martin Birdseye, unfurling a huge banner and letting it down from the bridge, saying that we should cut Trident, not jobs and services. It was a healthy reminder that more was at stake than British public services.

On March 30th I accompanied Tony Kempster, who was representing the international Peace Bureau, to the Royal Albert Hall, where we attended an 80th birthday celebration for Mikhail Gorbachev. It was a glittering occasion where "peace people" (though not enough of them we thought) mingled with politicians and business and show business figures. It was good, though to be celebrating someone whose achievement was to help usher in maximum change with minimum violence in a volatile situation.

Only a couple of weeks later came the Global Day of Action on Military Spending. This was an initiative of the International Peace Bureau, of which MAW is a member, and it included many and varied activities in many countries. MAW organised a meeting at Friends' House in London with the title Warfare or Welfare. Sometimes we who would like to make the case against war have to contend with a prevailing view that we are idealists who aren't aware of what the real world is like. John Hilary of War on Want., Husna Ahmed of Faith Re-Gen, Stuart Parkinson of Scientists for Global Responsibility, Kate Hudson of CND, and MAW member Vijay Mehta of

Uniting for Peace, are all firmly grounded in the real world, and could all show in a variety of ways how harmful is the vast military budget, and what a difference it could make if it were diverted to peaceful use. Those who were not at the meeting can find links to their presentations on the MAW website – good ammunition for peace.

It is surely no coincidence that later today we shall be hearing someone else who knows a lot about the real world, Sir Richard Jolly, speaking on the subject of Development and Disarmament: the kindest cut of all.

In mid-May our 5th Peace History Conference was held here in the Imperial War Museum. Entitled Pioneers and Prophets it featured a wide variety of peacemakers, from John Bright, 19th century campaigner against war and slavery, to conscientious objectors alive today, and talking about the stand they took during World War Two to a group of today's teenagers. As well as facts and lectures, we enjoyed film, drama, poetry and song on related themes. There are at the moment no plans for a similar conference here next spring, although we may have a different event in its place. Members in the north of England are exploring the possibility of having a conference there instead, perhaps in Leeds or Manchester

June saw the death of persistent and vocal anti-war campaigner Brian Haw. He had been in Parliament Square for over ten years, refusing to keep quiet about the suffering wrought first by sanctions, then by war in Iraq and later in Afghanistan. He dared to stick his neck out much further than most of us, and was heaped with abuse from some and adulation from others. We remember with gratitude his courage and persistence.

Since its beginnings in February, we have probably all been watching the events of the "Arab spring", willing those who wanted an end to tyrannical regimes to succeed, but without wholesale bloodshed. Those events are still unfolding, and results have been mixed. Tunisia has managed a democratic election; Egypt has rid itself of its tyrant, but the army has moved into take power and those wanting democracy are still unsatisfied; in Syria and Bahrain the rulers have used ruthless violence to try to quench rebellion; and as for Libya, events there could form the theme of a lecture, or a whole conference, on their own. NATO's intervention there was approved by the United Nations, but for the purposes of protecting non-combatants by means of a no-fly zone, and once it had begun it went far beyond the original brief. The questions raised about justifying military intervention, and perhaps even more about controlling it once it has started, are complex and I have no special qualification. But I think we all have a duty to follow events, to try to learn from them, and to comment if we can when we see spurious justification for the shedding of innocent blood.

This year has seen the 10th anniversary of 9/11. On September 10th I went to support East London Against Arms Fairs, who were calling attention to the DSEI weapons fair at the Excel Centre. The same event was taking place in 2001 when the twin towers fell – and demonstrators were told that they being disrespectful to the victims by opposing it. Despite all the hard work of CAAT, there is still an enormous job of education to be done. If our culture assumes that wars are inevitable and acceptable, there's a lazy tendency, exemplified by the then Defence Secretary himself on September 13th, to see the manufacture and selling of weapons as a healthy and desirable thing. Liam Fox was able to talk of exportability and "widening

the customer base” with such enthusiasm that he might have been talking about selling bread, not bombs.

As I hand over to a new and much younger chairperson today, I hope MAW will continue with new vigour to pursue its aims. We have to keep our balance, learning and sharing facts, rational and realistic, but also caring passionately about our fellow humans and the world we live in, and how it might be freed from the destructive power of warfare.

Sue Gilmurray