

Disarmament Politics



The National Conference of the Nuclear Disarmament Party was to set the scene for the future. Instead, the bubble burst. NIC MACLELLAN reports on the Conference.

"The NDP still faces a precarious and difficult future. Born without adequate forethought or discussion, it may find that running a seven week campaign is very different to maintaining an ongoing presence and structure. Abundant enthusiasm and energy may prevent it crumbling under the long term pressure, but it is important that those involved are aware of the disillusioning and dispiriting effects such a demise would have".¹

Those words were written before the first national conference of the Nuclear Disarmament Party (NDP). At first response, the brawl which erupted at the gathering brought confusion and disillusionment to those who had supported the party as members, sympathisers and voters. But the walkout and subsequent realignments have also raised the potential for a wider debate on the role of parliamentary campaigning in achieving disarmament.

For many people who rallied on March 31 — as well as those

who view disarmament groups through the prism of the media — there's little difference between NDP, PND, NFIP and the rest of the alphabet. We are regarded collectively as "the peace movement". The NDP is often perceived as the parliamentary wing of that movement, as much as people inside and outside the party would disavow such status. For that reason, the internal disagreements of the NDP have implications for other activists.

The NDP captured the sense of frustration and anger at the Hawke government's nuclear policies, and further electoral successes seemed the way forward. But we face government intransigence, a renewed push to involve Australia in Star Wars, and the launching of a revamped alliance with the United States. With an election in the next few years, and great and powerful friends hovering over the right shoulder, the Government is not going to leap to take up the demands put forward by disarmament groups.

The electoral vote that catapulted Jo Vallentine to national prominence tapped a reserve of concern that is not often reached by activists, and indicates the support that is necessary to achieve the changes we want. But the debate on how activist groups can work with parliamentary representatives, and in support of or opposition to social democratic governments, has not really been thrashed out. It is little comfort that the same debate is occurring in many other countries.

The NDP conflict raises the question of accountability in national forums — an important problem as we move towards better co-ordination of state coalitions. Jo Vallentine has been thrust into the awkward position of being seen as the peace movement's spokesperson. But there is a danger if only a few public figures are seen as representing the diversity of groups involved in disarmament activities. Having raised the issues of national prominence, we now face pressure to tidy up our image, and confine the framework of debate.

A worrying feature of electoral success is that it falls back into the classical definition of political

The Election and Defection of the NDP

activity. Having mucked about in the streets for a few years, we are now involved in "real" politics — and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) has become the bogey symbol representing all those who would remain on the margins.

With cries of "infiltration" and "McCarthyism" ringing through the media, the whole debate has been skewed. It is a bit late to be discovering that there are Reds in the peace movement: the fracas has avoided any discussion of the politics they are advocating. The SWP, like many other socialists, have put a lot of work into disarmament campaigning, and it is a bit rough that they are abused simply as stackers and packers. (Even so, the SWP's injured cries of innocence carry little weight. Too many people have experienced the invasion of the body snatchers to ignore the Party's program and politics, whether in the NDP or other groupings).

A better outcome of the NDP's public profile would have been some substantial debate on policies and alternatives: in such a debate, people could discuss the SWP's injured cries of innocence carry little weight. Too many people have experienced the invasion of the body snatchers to ignore the Party's program and politics, whether in the NDP or other groupings).

A better outcome of the NDP's public profile would have been some substantial debate on policies and alternatives: in such a debate, people could discuss the SWP's abysmal attitude to Soviet nuclear policy. It is unfortunate that Jo Vallentine began drawing the distinction between multilateralists and unilateralists. These have become codewords in the disarmament debate, distinguishing sensible souls, from those who are ready to hand the country over to the KGB.

We do not have to choose one or the other tag — the program advocated by most Australian disarmament groups is to push the government to take unilateral initiatives to break the cycle of regional and global militarization, without waiting for multilateral negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union.

If people are going to act on such a program over a number of years, they have to believe it is possible — and this will involve taking on a variety of issues. The throwaway line that nuclear disarmament is a single issue — albeit the most important — just won't work. Even people who are sympathetic to the list of issues presented by nuclear disarmament groups soon start to ask the hard questions: what about economic destabilization? What sort of economic

and social structures would a nuclear-free Australia and a nuclear free and independent Pacific involve? What about the links between nuclear culture and violence in the home, the streets, the Third World? and what about the Russians?

We must continue the basic organising around key themes, and build coalitions that draw new people to activity. But that will not occur by simply accepting existing frameworks of debate or refusing to draw links with other issues.

Disarmament groups have succeeded in popularizing basic concerns about the arms build-up, but not in advocating alternatives. If being involved in "real" politics at a national level means we cannot organise around radical perspectives, and challenge people to break from the nuclear logic and the security of deterrence, there is no way we will achieve even our most basic aims.

1. John Wiseman: "New Hopes on New Problems — some reflections on the Nuclear Election and the rise of the NDP" *Flashpoint* Vol. 2 No. 1, April 1985.

Nic Maclellan is a free-lance journalist and Pacific correspondent for the New York Guardian.

Making Sense of the NDP Split

KEN MANSELL analyses the split in the NDP. He argues the split reflects the refusal of the Party to openly consider the "real issues" of disarmament, preferring instead to concentrate on structural and organizational matters.

Only last December the future of the Nuclear Disarmament Party, then riding a wave of unprecedented anti-nuclear sentiment, seemed rosy and assured. Today, the Party faces the very real prospect of complete disintegration. It seems likely that the NDP will lose its only Senator and the whole West Australian Branch, while in Victoria and New South Wales a significant

number of activists have resigned and established a rival pole of attraction for those who are confused or uncertain about their commitment to the NDP. The setback from these developments will weaken the NDP considerably, at least in the short term. Likely to be far more serious is the long-term effect of damaged public credibility and demoralization among

supporters and rank and file members, many of whom must now be alienated, rightly or wrongly, from the NDP. The disarmament movement as a whole can only suffer from the existence of divided, and perhaps competing, forces. It is possible that there may soon be two anti-nuclear parties with, in the worst possible case, the NDP reduced (or seen to be reduced) to a sect-like rump of its former self.

The NDP split is a debilitating and tragic event. One can imagine that some of the protagonists view it as a necessary cleansing

process purging all evil elements but, if true, this is because, just as in war the first casualty is truth, the first casualty of faction fights is objectivity. In any intense faction fight the level of emotion soars towards hysteria and the level of mistrust towards paranoia. Adherents of the "other side" are seen as beyond the pale and "out to get us". Simplistic black and white logic prevails. Debate and discussion degenerates as moral pressure is applied, often unconsciously, on individuals to line up for or against a particular "faction". Those who belong to neither camp are categorized as, at best, untrustworthy or fence-sitters and, at worst, as being fellow-travellers of the "other side". Instead of a discussion producing a variety or spectrum of positions, there is a rapid and eventually irrevocable polarization of opinions. It is not long before each pole is battling for control of the office and the funds. Elements of this typical process are being witnessed inside the NDP. So, can the NDP still be salvaged? Is detachment and objectivity possible at all in the present circumstances?

So far, the post-Conference "debate" has centred upon the supposed "crimes" of the respective "factions" and upon the crimes of the *personalities* involved in leading them, (namely the walkout on the one hand, and the supposed stacking by the SWP on the other hand). Thus we have had a continuation of the equally unhealthy personalization that occurred during the election campaign, with its Garrett cult and media-oriented gimmickry. The very personalities who were accredited with the quality of leading the anti-nuclear flock from the wilderness are now ironically being castigated for their satanism. Personalization leads nowhere. The fact of the matter is that individuals embody political tendencies. Only a few of those who now cry for the blood of Jo Vallentine openly questioned her (or more particularly the cult built up around her as the sole parliamentary representative) two months, or even one month,

ago. Those opposed now to SWP "influence" did not openly challenge them politically.

The split reflects *political* disagreements which have not been aired and which have been obscured by the very terms in which the debate has been conducted. The real issues have been *displaced* — by the overwhelming concentration on organizational questions to the detriment of discussing the basic political disagreements.

Along with the obscuring of the political issues there has also been a marked Orwellianization of the terms of the debate about the Conference — both in the daily press and within the NDP. The SWP has been labelled "extreme" and Garrett "conservative". But compere Garrett's preparedness to augment the three-point program to include opposition to the presence of nuclear forces in the oceans bounding Australia with the SWP's general conservatism towards exploring the ramifications of the three points (and not just where this would imply consideration of the USSR). The debate over unilateralism and multilateralism is also skewed. Heaven forbid that the SWP and Jo Vallentine be allowed to make the running here, although one suspects that they already have. The SWP is "unilateralist", Vallentine "multilateralist" — according to the self-definitions, that is. But the SWP's definition of unilateralism is unilateralism in the West, but not also in the East. As to definitions of multilateralism, the varieties floating about include: A) Unilateral disarmament by both sides (whether simultaneously or not). B) Disarmament by both sides through negotiations leading to phased reductions. C) That the anti-nuclear movement should strategically aim to pressure its own government towards persuading the superpowers to achieve B. . . . The meaning of Jo Vallentine's self-professed "multilateralism" is not clear at all other than that the term is being counterposed to unilateralism. Vallentine's *actions* (and, one would have presumed, her Quakerism) believe her being

opposed to unilateralism so it is just possible that she has accepted the SWP's definition of unilateralism, and, finding that unacceptable, rejected the term out of hand. Such messy confusion should be sorted out now. No more striking reason for the importance of discussing the Soviet Question — the missing 'centre' of NDP politics — could be given.

Literally every new week brings further revelations of Australia's shameful complicity in the nuclear arms race. The tasks ahead become more urgent and impose greater and greater strains on us all. It is a tragedy that such an important part of the anti-nuclear movement is consumed by internecine warfare. If the present style of debate continues within the NDP, the party will either self-destruct or be left as a hollow sect-like shell. Obviously, the organizational differences do have to be urgently addressed. Hopefully, they can be without witch-hunts, acrimony and recrimination. Hopefully, defections can be minimized. Melzer's destructive comments should not be used to close off avenues for reconciliation in Victoria. We have all contributed in some way to the failure of the National Conference — the whole point of this article is to make that clear — and blaming one group or individual above others (personalization again) is pointless. This means not avoiding thinking about the Conference or the reasons for its failure. The failure was prepared months ago, so in a sense we must look backward and ask questions such as — What were the effects of the NDP election campaign and of the media-oriented populism that characterized it? Even more importantly, we must look forward — how to build viable campaigns that enthuse, involve and empower the NDP membership; how to ensure unity, democracy and democratic debate in an essentially populist, and still single-issue, party composed of members with vastly different social and class perspectives.