

THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST CONSCRIPTION

- Murray Horton

New Zealand has a long and honourable history of resistance to militarism. The OHMS campaign against national military service, culminating in the gaoling of Geoff Woolford and the abolition of national service by the Labour government was merely the latest manifestation of this. The most recent upheaval involving militarism before this was the peacetime conscription issue of 1949, the last year of the first Labour government, led by Peter Fraser.

Conscription was a particularly bitter and divisive issue amongst the Labour government and Labour movement in general. Many of the Cabinet had been involved in the movement against conscription in WWI and had been gaoled for it – Peter Fraser, the Prime Minister, and Bob Semple, the Minister of Public Works, had been gaoled for sedition; Wally Nash, Minister of Finance (and later Prime Minister) had been gaoled for refusing to sign up. John A Lee said in “Simple on a Soapbox” - “The Hon. Mark Fagan had smuggled conscription resisters in timber and coal vessels out of NZ into anti-conscription Australia. Tim Armstrong had gone to court to seek exemption for his sons from conscription and Paddy Webb had gone from Parliament to gaol when called in the ballot.” Fraser himself had written during WWI “For the past two and a half years we have been looking at the ruling classes of Europe spreading woe, want and murder over the Continent and it is time that the working classes of the different nations were rising up in protest against them . . . And so far, only one country (Russia) has said, this has gone far enough; we will submit to it no more.”

When WWII broke out, Fraser's Labour government specifically promised that there would be no conscription. Yet it was introduced within two weeks of this. Fraser tried to soften the blow by announcing that there would be a conscription of wealth as well as manpower – a fact disproved by Jock Barnes, president of the Waterside Workers Union, who produced figures showing that workers' share of the national income slipped from 1938-48 while company and personal income increased. (Barnes was to become a central figure in the 1951 waterfront dispute.)

Peter Fraser became a victim to the anti-communism and war mongering hysteria of the Cold War. In May 1949 he took three defence resolutions to the Labour Party Conference, resolutions which had been reluctantly approved by Cabinet and Caucus. Fraser said – “we must be ready to defend the country. I must have my answer.” The conference passed two of the resolutions, calling for full provision for the defence of New Zealand and adjacent Pacific areas, and the maximum possible contribution to the defence of the British Commonwealth. The third one read that the Conference “request the government to use all the resources of the country, including compulsory national service, if the government, after exploring all possibilities and alternatives is convinced that such a measure is essential for the defence and preservation of our people, our country and our Commonwealth.” This met violent and bitter opposition and the Conference threatened to reassert its opposition to peacetime conscription. Fraser therefore proposed an amendment ending with “and if the resources are not available without compulsory service the government should be requested to obtain the views of the electors by a referendum.” This was accepted, the Conference seeing it as an investigation of manpower availability and then further discussion – Fraser, however, saw it as an endorsement that manpower resources were not otherwise available, and pressed for a referendum on peacetime conscription at the earliest possible opportunity.

Fraser staked his political career on the campaign for peacetime conscription. He led the campaign personally, it was funded by Parliament and actively supported by the National Party and the RSA. There were some strange bedfellows in the campaign – Mr Perry, President of Federated Farmers said “Compulsory service would mean tremendous dislocation of the whole economic life unless the rest of the people in the community were prepared to work harder to make up for the loss of effort . . . If the teeming millions of the Est decided to come down here, even in canoes, they could make it exceedingly difficult for us.”

All pretence at democracy or informing the public to enable them to vote went by the board - “It was only with difficulty and some help from the opposition that opponents of conscription (among whom he had himself been numbered thirty years before) were able to secure the right to speak on the State-controlled broadcasting system.” – Professor Kieth Sinclair, “History of New Zealand”. Back to Joh A Lee's “Simple on a Soapbox” – “Fraser equipped an organiser (for the “Yes” campaign) with a government car. The chauffeur donned ordinary

civilian clothes, so that no one would know the car, another set of plates was procured; the organiser, the car, the chauffeur, were governmental, but apparently civilian . . . General Kippenberger, President of the RSA . . . agreed to handle the campaign through the RSA. Thus we had a non-governmental organisation handling the campaign and having the use of vast public funds . . . the “Yes” campaign had full-page advertisements paid from the public purse, a silenced Labour movement, a unanimous press and Fraser loaded the radio campaign against us.”

The opposition campaign was formidable – Frank Langstone former Labour Cabinet Minister and then current MP for Mt. Roskill, passionately opposed it – he produced pamphlets and wrote an open letter to his constituents - “One feels certain that if the Nation Party had been the government and had come forward with this proposal it would have been vigorously opposed by both the political and industrial sections of the Labour movement . . . the only real effective safeguard against war is international disarmament and New Zealand should be the standard bearer in the fight for world peace and total international disarmament. Is war imminent? President Truman says No! Prime Minister Attlee says No! Prime Minister Chifley says No! and Uncle Joe says No! Who the says Yes!” Jock Barnes and John A Lee joined forces – Lee wrote “Are we to conscript and enslave ourselves to enslave the peoples of the East, to try to hold back history? Were I in China, I would be working with Rewi Alley trying to build a new age co-operatively rather than with United States interventionists trying to prop up feudalism with armaments. The freeing of Chinese, the freeing of Malaysians, of Indonesians, does not menace me. The freeing of an Asiatic is not a menace to New Zealanders. I am a patriotic New Zealander but I say a free man with a yellow or a red or a black skin does not excite in me a will to kill! And yet unless we believe that freedom for others is slavery for us, why should we build armies to “contain” those others? The new bogey will be China gone free.” Pacifist groups opposed peacetime conscription; trades councils and unions opposed it, as did women's groups. Students demonstrated against it. In September 1948, twenty prominent unionists signed a manifesto saying in part “We serve notice that should this crime against the people of New Zealand come to pass, we will fight its operation with all the vigour and means at our disposal.”

The opposition campaign didn't have a chance – Fraser exercised absolute control over the media. A group called the Joint Defence Action Committee flooded the papers with ads and articles supporting conscription – the editor of the 'Standard', the Labour Party's own paper, wrote an article critical of them and said he wouldn't publish their material – Fraser unsuccessfully tried to have him fired. A paid ad in the “Listener” by the Anti-Conscription Federation was censored by the Minister of Defence, who was also in charge of broadcasting. In July 1949, a letter was circulated to newspaper editors from Fraser's office – “The Prime Minister has directed that I express his thanks to you for the cooperation that has been given, in presenting information concerning the proposal to introduce compulsory military training. He further asks that you consider the possibility of avoiding the use of the word conscription when referring to compulsory military training. The word conscription has wider meanings which, if associated with the scheme, would be unhelpful.” The press blocked out coverage of the anti-conscription campaign. Fraser spoke on the radio nearly every night – the Communist Party was refused any air time to oppose conscription. To silence opposition within the Labour Party, party funds were frozen for those MPs who campaigned against conscription, especially in Langston's Mt. Roskill constituency. There was also violence – demonstrating pacifists were beaten up by a mob in Nelson. Police questioned anti-conscriptionists and harassed them in their homes. When a Communist Party speaker went to speak at the Addington railway workshops the gates were locked and nine baton wielding cops were on hand – the government tried to stop him speaking at the Dunedin railway workshops.

The result of the August referendum was a forgone conclusion in these circumstances – there was only a 57% poll, with 535,816 voting for peacetime conscription and 152,573 against. It was passed through Parliament with only Langston opposing it. It was a shameless betrayal of everything the Labour Party had stood for and a cynical manipulation of “democracy” – there was some solace in that Fraser was voted out later that year ending fourteen years of Labour government. Fraser's last years paved the way for the regime of Sid Holland that was to follow.

Labour's shameful sellout on the conscription issue should be seen in the context of those post WWII years. Fraser and Semple, the one time Red Fed leaders who had been jailed for sedition, had become fanatical anti-Communists. The RSA unsuccessfully tried to bar Communists from membership. The “Press” had to publicly apologise to a man named in a US State Dept report as one of the “500 of the more important Communist leaders outside the Soviet Union” – he turned out to be a leader writer for the Labour Party's own paper, the “Southern Cross”. Our old friend “Salient” was banned by the University Council for criticising conditions in a university hostel. Victoria students were prosecuted for demonstrating for Indonesian independence. Communist and pacifist leaders were constantly prosecuted under City Council by-laws for speaking on Wellington streets.

The Labour government had become inflexibly reactionary. In 1946 a royal commission of inquiry into the liquor trade recommended the nationalisation of the breweries, with the profits to go towards repaying the purchase price, improving pubs and providing money for recreational, cultural and philanthropic purposes – when the government brought in legislation two years later, it ignored the nationalisation recommendation. Said Sid Holland, leader of the National Party – “The House looked forward to another retreat from Socialism in that any proposal that the State should take over the breweries, and hotels would not have a place in the bill. It was urgent that the spirit of private enterprise might continue in this particular industry.” Labour amended the Shipping and Seamen Act, increasing the penalty for desertion from one month to six months prison – H.G.R Mason, the Attorney-General, said it was the result of strong representations from overseas shipping interests – and indeed 26 Canadian seamen off one ship were later gaoled under the Act. Labour passed the 1948 Aliens Act under which any alien deemed “not conducive to the public good” (regardless of having committed a crime or not) could be arrested, imprisoned and deported – Leonardo Pagliara was deported under this Act last year. The American Federation of Labour pressured the FOL, led by the notorious Fintan Patrick Walsh, to withdraw from the “Communist” World Federation of Trade Unions and join the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions – the wharfies and miners stayed in the WFTU.

Equally disgraceful in 1949 was the government's handling of the Auckland carpenters' dispute. The carpenters appealed to the Arbitration Court to have their pre-WWII margin for skill restored – this was refused and payment for travel time was also dropped. 900-odd employers decided to pay them anyway – 30-odd refused. The carpenters went on a go-slow against the minority of employers – with the result that the employers locked out all 1500 carpenters. The FOL initially supported the carpenters and an industrial confrontation built up – Fraser called in Walsh and the FOL reversed its decision, advising its affiliates not to deal with the Auckland Action Committee, and asked the carpenters to turn their dispute over to the FOL. Fraser and his Minister of Labour, Angus McLagan (a former Communist) told the FOL Conference it was a political, not an industrial dispute, a Communist plot to oust the Labour government. The carpenters voted not to turn their dispute over to the FOL, therefore McLagan deregistered them. (Yes, a Labour government deregistered a union before Sid Holland's fling in 1951). A scab union was set up, supervised by employers, with its initial funds from an unreported source – the carpenters went back to work and McLagan recognised the scab union, despite the FOL Conference having resolved “Under no circumstances will this conference recognise a scab union.”

The deregistered union got a legal opinion that it was still perfectly legal for it to exist and it did so for several months, competing for membership with the scab union. The deregistered union's members were blacklisted by employers and businessmen, harassed by police, the Railways Dept applied the blacklist, the Mines Dept forbade miners to collect a levy for the carpenters, the Housing Dept advanced money to builders when their jobs weren't progressing, the Waterfront Industry Authority locked-out wharfies supporting the carpenters, the Social Security Dept refused the dole to locked-out carpenters, police patrolled and protected scab jobs. The government finally killed the deregistered union by amending the Arbitration Act, so that any “union” of fifteen men or more could be set up in a locality rather than the whole of an industrial district. In his Red Fed days, Semple had said the Arbitration Court was “created by the oppressors of the workers” . Now in the words of Dr W. B Sutch in “The Quest for Security in New Zealand – 1840 – 1966” – “It was the carpenters lock-out of 1949 which finally made the arbitration system into a complete state machine, for the Minister of Labour had now full authority to fragment unions to deregister a union, recognise another with 15 members and make it the legal union to which all in the occupation in the specified area must belong.” The FOL was an active partner in all this. The Labour government even used the 1913 Watching and Besetting Act against the carpenters, an Act which had originally been used against many in the Labour government. Fraser and co laid the groundwork well for Holland's onslaught on the working class two years later.

Labour also used straight-out Watergate-style smear tactics. J. P Lewin was president of the PSA (more recently he was the Government Statistician) and leader of a campaign to have public servants' pay increased. Lewin had helped in the drafting of Labour's economic policy in its 1946 election manifesto, had toured the world with Wally Nash, Minister of Finance, as an economic adviser at international conferences, and had been Nash's research secretary. But the public service wages campaign upset Walsh and Nash, who were worried about its effect on Labour's stabilisation policy. Cecil Holmes was a film director in the Government Film Unit, a delegate to the PSA and a member of the Communist Party of NZ. He wrote to Lewin in “somewhat coarse but not unusual language” about a stopwork meeting the Unit was going to hold protesting government inaction on the pay claim – the letter suggested how the meeting should be handled. This letter was in a satchel which, along with a camera, was stolen from a government car Holmes was using at Parliament Buildings – his CPNZ membership card was in the satchel as well. The stolen documents were given to Walsh, who passed them on

to the Commissioner and Police and Nash. Walsh urged Nash to make them public or he would – Nash's past association with Lewin and the fact that Lewin's mother was dying caused our Wally to have qualms, but only enough to delay releasing it until a week after Lewin's mother died – they were released from “the Prime Minister's Dept”. Nash urged the head of the Public Service Commission to take appropriate action. The aim was obviously to discredit Lewin and the wages campaign by showing its leader to be a tool of Communists – Holmes was dismissed in December 1948 without trial “for an attitude of gross disobedience to authority”. Months later the Supreme Court overturned this decision on the grounds of a lack of natural justice – Holmes was paid nine months back salary by the government. The PSA stood by Lewin and elected him a life member; consequently government moves to have him fired failed. As Sutch says “The idea was to show up Lewin as a Communist tool receiving familiar letters of instruction from a member of the party.” God bless your soul, Sir Walter.

The conscription issue was just part of the degeneration of New Zealand's first Labour government.

It happened here.