

## THE 1948-1949 ANTI-CONSCRIPTION CAMPAIGN An Eye-Witness Account by Harry Evison

Michael Bassett, the renegade Labour Party politician who later wrote right-wing columns for the newspapers, stated in one of his columns in *The Press* in 2002 that Peter Fraser was New Zealand's greatest political leader of the 20th century. A 'Press' journalist, Peter Luke, wrote an article agreeing with him. I wrote to *The Press* (15 November 2002) saying that theirs must be a strange idea of leadership, for in 1948 Fraser split his own party. This was on the issue of peacetime military conscription (see W.B. Sutch *Poverty & Progress in New Zealand*, 1969, Ch. 21 and Elsie Locke's *Peace People*, 1992, pp 128-133).

In July 1948, to many people's surprise, the Labour Minister of Defence Fred Jones suggested in Parliament that the Government might have to introduce 'some form of national service' to get enough young men into the armed forces. Labour had traditionally opposed peacetime conscription, but the reason now given was that with the increasing international tension, New Zealand had to be able to defend itself. When Jones repeated his suggestion in August, we varsity socialists decided to organize an anti-conscription street march for the start of term 3. After I had consulted Jock Barnes, president of the Watersiders Union, we decided on lunch hour Wednesday 29 September for the march, to suit the watersiders.

On Sunday before the march, we convened a working bee at the varsity Old Gym. Plenty of good banners and placards were prepared, supporting peace and opposing peacetime conscription. At the appointed hour of 12.15pm on the day of the march we gathered in Mercer Street in front of the public library with our placards and banners, and we had nearly as many of these as we had people. I was to lead off with a wreath to be laid on the Cenotaph, bearing a placard on which I had written, at the suggestion of Jim Winchester, the famous words from Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg War Cemetery address of 1863 ending with the words, 'We here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain.' This seemed fair enough, for we were marching for 'Peace' as well as 'Anti-Conscription'.

Jock Barnes loomed up on the footpath by himself, so I asked him where were the watersiders. He said, 'How many people have you got?' I looked around, and told him we had more than a hundred. He said, 'Well, we're not marching unless you've got a thousand.' So that was that. The watersiders wouldn't march. We formed up ready to march by ourselves. At that moment, Ron Smith turned up carrying a large New Zealand flag. He had not been seen at our committee meetings, or at the working bee. I said, 'Put that away, Ron, it's been decided that we're not carrying any flags.' But Ron was on the district committee of the Communist Party. They must have decided that he should carry the flag, for he insisted on it. When we marched off, he hopped to the front, abreast of me, and 'led' the procession with his patriotic flag. This annoyed me, as I and the people I had been working with were against any form of flag-wagging, whatever the context. Elsie Locke's book (page 129) has a photograph of Ron Smith, supplied by himself, 'leading' the procession and carrying the national flag.

As we marched along Lambton Quay to the Cenotaph most people, shoppers and office workers alike, just stood and stared. But one old lady called out, 'Good on yer, boys!' When we reached the Cenotaph I read out Lincoln's words and laid the wreath, and we went our ways. Next day the morning

paper ran a photo of a well-known local drunk hurling our wreath from the Cenotaph platform, with the caption 'Irate citizen . . .' etc. He had been nowhere in sight when we were at the Cenotaph, so we suspected that he had been specially enlisted for the purpose of the photograph. Following this, Jock Barnes and John A. Lee went on a speaking tour promoting opposition to the government's proposal.

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Early in 1949 the controversy over the government's proposal for peacetime CMT (compulsory military training) intensified, with anti-conscription committees being set up in several centres. In March these organizations held a conference in Wellington and established the New Zealand Peace and Anti-Conscription Federation. This made the Prime Minister Peter Fraser even more determined to get the country on his side. In May, I was at the Federation of Labour (FOL) Conference upstairs in the Wellington Trades Hall as an accredited student observer, when Fraser came in and made a speech demanding the Federation's support for CMT. 'I want my answer!' he shouted, and the *Evening Post* that afternoon published a large photo of an angry Mr Fraser making his demand. As soon as Fraser had left the podium after his speech, my fellow-observer 'Chook' Fowler and I followed him out to question him. He shook us by the hand (it was like shaking a wet fish), but he couldn't stop to talk: he was in a hurry. As he went down the stairs Chook called after him, 'Ramsay McFraser!' – an allusion to Ramsay Macdonald, the British Labour leader who deserted his party in 1931 to form a government with the Conservatives.

Failing to get the support of the F.O.L., or the outright support of the Labour Party conference that followed, Fraser gave notice that a referendum of voters would be held to determine whether New Zealanders wanted CMT or not. The referendum was to be held on 3rd August. This was the signal for a vigorous and very bitter public controversy, with both sides campaigning frantically to win over public opinion. The campaign was rather one-sided, for Fraser's government pitched in with everything it could muster in favour of CMT. Fraser secured the support of the newspapers, banned Labour Party branches from assisting the opponents of CMT, and set his secret police to spy on his opponents. On top of that of course the National Party and the New Zealand RSA enthusiastically supported CMT.

Many public anti-conscription meetings were held and addressed by left-wing Labour party people led by Frank Langstone, who had been Minister of Lands from 1935 to 1942 in the first Labour government. As a student spokesman I went on stage to speak against CMT at a big public meeting in the Wellington Town Hall, along with Jock Barnes, Frank Langstone, John A. Lee, and Mrs Furey of the Wellington Housewives Union. We had a good reception, and although it was a rowdy meeting, a resolution opposing CMT was easily passed. Years later, I found that the secret police had me on their black list for just one thing: for speaking on the anti-conscription platform with Mrs Furey (who was a Communist Party member)! During the campaign I happened to meet Toby Hill and Jock Barnes of the Waterside Workers Union on the Lyttelton ferry. I asked Toby what he thought the outcome of the referendum would be. He said, 'We could win if the Commies would keep out of it.'

In 2003 Professor Bill Oliver published a memoir, with a blurb modestly billing him as 'New Zealand's most respected philosopher-historian-poet', etc. The book has plenty of name-dropping, and

one of the names he drops is mine. Once long ago, says Bill, the Victoria College SCM held a meeting to hear Jack Marshall MP (later Prime Minister), and 'Harry Evison gave Marshall a hard time'. Bill Oliver, like me, was a VUC post-graduate history student at that time. In his memoir, Bill Oliver reports the punch-lines that followed my criticism of Marshall's talk accurately enough, but he doesn't say what the argument was about. It was when Fraser's referendum campaign for peacetime conscription was in full swing. Fraser's wretched campaign was supported enthusiastically by the National Party, including Jack Marshall, then in his first term as National M.P. for Mount Victoria. Marshall, a lawyer by profession (and 12 years older than me) had served overseas in the NZ Army during the 1939-1945 war with the rank of major. Peacetime conscription being the leading question of the day, the SCM had chosen it as the subject for one of their discussion evenings. To lead the discussion, they invited Marshall as MP for Mt Victoria, and me as chairman of the VUC Socialist Club and well-known stump-orator for the anti-conscription campaign. We were all seated informally around someone's comfortable lounge in Karori, Marshall and I being seated on the floor at centre, almost cheek-by-jowl. He began with an account of how he and the RSA and the National Party had successfully defended the country against our enemies in the 1939-1945 war, and now with the Communist Menace looming they were ready to do the same again. Then he warmed to the subject of how all patriotic New Zealanders must resist communism.

When my turn came, I got stuck in to 'Gentleman Jack', which some people there obviously thought was a rude thing to do. I argued that there was no evidence that anyone was preparing to attack New Zealand, and that the scare campaign being run by the Fraser government and by National was being done only to please the U.S.A. I challenged Marshall to explain, as a military man, how 18-year-old conscripts could possibly defend the country if it was under attack, and I asked why Marshall and other conscription enthusiasts didn't go back into the army themselves if they thought the country was in danger. Jack Marshall seemed nonplussed. He seemed genuinely unaware that there could be any opinion contrary to his, in sane society. He didn't even attempt to argue the issue. Instead, as Oliver reports, the following exchange took place:

Marshall (to me): You talk like a communist.

Me: I am a communist.

This exchange caused 'general astonishment', says Oliver. Characteristically, Oliver gives the impression that either he had forgotten what the argument was about, or else that it didn't matter. He always seemed to steer clear of any serious political controversy.

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At Victoria College I organized one last meeting on compulsory military training. To ensure the discussion was not one-sided, I invited Major-General Sir Howard Kippenberger, president of the New Zealand RSA, to share the platform with me and give his views on CMT. He agreed. I booked the largest lecture theatre for a whole evening (to 10pm), and advertised the meeting widely. With Kippenberger as a speaker, I was sure we would get a good attendance. Kippenberger was highly respected as a war hero, and deservedly so for his bravery in the 1939-1945 war, in which he was very badly wounded.

Sure enough, our lecture theatre was packed full, and in the audience I saw my father. General Kippenberger arrived and took his seat, wearing civilian clothes. I asked him if he would speak first, but

he preferred that I should begin. So I got up and put the case against the government's proposal for compulsory military training. I argued that there was no real evidence that the country was in danger, and even if it was, the age group proposed for CMT by the Defence Minister - '18 years or thereabouts' - would hardly be very effective in defending the country; it would also be unfair to 18-year-olds to disrupt their education or vocational training by CMT. I suggested that the government would do better, if the country really was in danger, to offer suitable inducements for older men with military experience to come forward, for judging by all the vociferous support there was for CMT, there should be no shortage of volunteers. (Applause). Then I went on to say, that from my own experience of more than three years in the wartime armed forces, the military life with its irritating parade ground drill and bullying NCOs was no training in democracy for young New Zealanders.

When General Kippenberger got up to speak, to my disappointment he did not make a rousing speech about the danger the country was in. He seemed more concerned to defend the army life against the aspersions I had made. In the course of his remarks he said, 'It would do young men good to learn to stand up straight and wash five times a day!' When he sat down, he was given decent applause; he was a very mild-mannered man. While I was announcing that it was now time for discussion, the general took out his pipe and proceeded to light up. Suddenly there was an interruption from the back row. This was the varsity caretaker, a big, burly, and usually tongue-tied man. He stood up and said loudly, 'Sir Kippenberger, there's a rule against smoking in lecture rooms, so you must put out your pipe.'

Some people evidently thought this was meant as a joke and started laughing. But unfortunately General Kippenberger took offence. He said, 'Well, I've been insulted.' He put away his pipe, stood up, put on his hat, and left the platform. I went out with him into the corridor, pleading with him to return to the meeting, but nothing I could do or say by way of apology would persuade him to stay. His driver was with him, and the general bade me good night. The meeting fell rather flat after this, but we had some discussion before I closed the meeting early. No doubt the caretaker was glad to get home sooner than he had expected. I was sorry to see, eight years later, that Sir Howard Kippenberger had died at the comparatively early age of 60 years. But, 'Wash five times a day?' This remark puzzled me. Allowing for one wash in the morning before duties, and another at the end of the day after going off duty, I didn't see the army NCOs allowing a man enough time off for three more washes in between.

The heat generated by the anti-conscription controversy spilled over into the schools, although I said nothing about it to my classes. The Wellington Tech students' weekly news-sheet one Monday morning carried a very strong denunciation of the government's proposal for CMT. In the staff room, someone showed it to J.V. Burton, who was a loyal Labour party man. He took one look at it and without a word went straight off to the 'headmaster' (Eric Cousins) to complain. Whether he tried to have the bulletin silenced I don't know, but I thought it strange for a supposedly liberal man to behave as he did: such was the intensity of the ill feeling.

One Monday morning after I had spoken against conscription 'on the stump' at the Basin Reserve at the weekend, a rather unpleasant fourth form youth denounced me in class as a 'Commie bastard.' I replied, 'Well, in that case you won't want to be taught by me, will you. So you can leave the room.' Out he went, and I resumed my lesson. Within a minute the door opened and he was back again, grinning broadly. Following him was the director Dr Ridling, who said 'I found this boy out in the corridor.' I said

I had sent him out for being insolent. 'Your job is to teach him,' said Dr Ridling, and went out. I had no more trouble during the lesson; perhaps the class sympathized with me.

The referendum was held on 3 August, a weekday. With both main parliamentary parties supporting CMT, and the radios and newspapers imposing a news blackout on all opposition to it, the result was a foregone conclusion: 568,427 votes in favour, 160,998 against. Former Labour supporters who opposed CMT, like Langstone, were already outside the Labour Party, and many more left after this.

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On a cold, wet winter's evening on the Monday after the CMT referendum, some of us 'communist conspirators' met in a comfortless upstairs committee room in an office block overlooking Featherston Street, Wellington, to discuss what, if anything, could be learned from the unsuccessful anti-conscription campaign. We had some bottles of beer for inspiration, but no one had thought of bringing anything to eat. After a while, someone looking out the window noticed that some sort of function was going on at the National Party headquarters across the street from our building. Large numbers of people were arriving, some by taxi, including numerous large women in fur coats. Apparently the National Party were having a celebration, perhaps to mark their victory in the referendum. At our table it was unanimously agreed that if the National Party had food at their celebration, while we did not, something should be done to redress the balance.

Gunter Warner, Dick Collins and Conrad Bollinger volunteered to visit the National Party building and get some food. They togged up in oilskin coats and sou'wester hats that the cyclists in our group had worn to get to our meeting. They then scuffed themselves up, and when everybody was satisfied that they looked shabby enough, they went down in the lift and out on to the street in the rain. With them went Gordon McDonald, who was to stand watch with Bollinger outside the National Party entrance while Dick and Gunter went inside.

Our foragers soon found the National Party's supper ladies. Posing as seamen from an overseas ship, they pitched a hard-luck story about being cold and hungry (which they were), and about needing some food for their hungry mates (which was true). They offered a handful of coins. Dick was a good linguist, and Gunter (being German) had no trouble speaking broken English. They won the hearts of the supper ladies, and arrived back at our meeting laden with boxes of excellent hot savouries and cream cakes. For good measure, Gordon McDonald had lifted a large portrait of the National Party's esteemed leader Sid Holland from its place of honour on the wall of the foyer, and brought it back as a trophy. We had a good supper, and toasted the National Party and its leader, whose portrait was propped up on our table in front of us.

When it was time for us to go home, the question arose as to what to do with Sid Holland's portrait. To take it back to its rightful place across the street was out of the question, as the National Party's security guards might now be looking for the thieves. It could not be left in our meeting room without embarrassing the daytime occupants. So Gordon McDonald undertook to wrap the portrait carefully in brown paper, and leave it at a 'left luggage' locker at the Wellington Railway Station. After a few days this was done, and the 'left luggage' docket was mailed to the Wellington National Party with a polite thank-you note for the loan of the portrait.

The triennial parliamentary election was held on Wednesday 30 November 1949, Labour having reverted to weekday general elections with employees entitled to time off work to vote, a system first instituted in 1881 to ensure the highest possible poll. Peter and Beverley Morris threw an evening 'election' party for us left-wingers at their home. When the early results were announced on the radio it was clear that National had won. We sat there drinking our beer, but got no joy from it. Labour's majority of 42 seats to National's 38, turned into a National majority of 46 seats to Labour's 34. Fraser had split the Labour Party with his referendum, opening the way for 23 years of almost uninterrupted National Party rule. Fraser carried on as Leader of the Opposition until his death a year later.

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