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'Pilgrimage from Iona' Personal experiences with the Australian anti-conscription and peace movements

Abstract
My Association with the Peace Movement didn't begin in Wollongong. I suppose it was part of my being, wedded to the fact that I was born in the Christian community of Iona, the Scottish missionary island, peculiarly dedicated to wholeness of life, hospitality, and compassion. But such positive ideas are easily stated - their test is in the dust of conflict. That was to happen much later when I found myself a soldier in the Second World War struggling against the racist idea that would deny, and trample under, those ideas I shared with so many others. At that level it was easy to be clear. Your enemy was just over the hill. Now it's less clear.
"PILGRIMAGE FROM IONA"

Personal experiences with the Australian anti-conscription and peace movements.

by Malcolm Black.

The Beginning

My Association with the Peace Movement didn't begin in "ollongong. I suppose it was part of my being, wedded to the fact that I was born in the Christian community of Iona, the Scottish missionary island, peculiarly dedicated to whole­ness of life, hospitality, and compassion.

But such positive ideas are easily stated - their test is in the dust of conflict. That was to happen much later when I found myself a soldier in the Second "world war strugg­ling against the racist idea that would deny, and trample under, those ideas I shared with so many others. At that level it was easy to be clear. Your enemy was just over the hill. Now it's less clear.

That point of blurred clarity arrived when the unconditional
surrender of fascist forces was achieved. In theory, the values of freedom, democracy and humanity, marching with Christianity, should have prevailed; but the idea of winning by force, once planted, was hard to uproot after six years of organised, permissive violence.

The Cold War

The Cold War broke out on the morrow of victory, and in some respects victory seemed a shame. Into this gap, in the U.K. at least, stepped the Peace Committees. My wife and I supported them.

Because I have often since been regularly accused, if that is the word, of being a communist, it is perhaps right to mention here that the people who supported, and often initiated the Peace Committees, were communists as well as, of course, nationalists and pacifists. This was all very understandable and, though I have been classed in all three categories, the thought gives me no tremors—the binding point is peace.

In the end, no-one is greatly affected by the diatribes apart from the people already committed by their own brand of politics, to hating another; yet uncounted damage is done to the floater—the person who has not thought out his own political views.

Thus an argument against peace becomes an argument against persons who are for peace; and afterwards an
argument against all the political ideas that bind those people together to work for peace. The warmongers are strongly politically aligned, too.

**Demonstrations: University/Parishes.**

Briefly then I demonstrated and argued for peace at University and in all my Parishes. In Carfin, my second Scottish Parish, I attended Pontifical High Mass at the local R. C. Chapel, to celebrate their fiftieth Anniversary, the same week as I demonstrated in Glasgow against the H-bomb, one of the seventy ministers from all denominations.

In Adelaide I had a fine congregation, but the most brutal, cold-blooded opposition. It had gone into action long before I landed in Australia. Elders had received a cutting from Scotland reading.

"No parting gift for minister, says elder" (referring erroneously to me) and this they diligently canvassed round the parish declaring "we think we’ve made a mistake calling Mr. Black". The campaign grew out of that! I lasted two years in Prospect, Adelaide - a tribute to the congregation struggling against elder-power. Very late in the peace we discovered a piece of slander had been circulating about as to the effect that I "drugged and drank and ran up debts in the name of another person which I had made no attempt to repay". So I swept the streets and sawed trees in Prospect, while Mary, a trained secretary clerked in a
I'yers' sweet-shop. In July, 1966 I was called to Central Illawarra (Dapto, Unanderra, and Mount Kembla).

The Illawarra.

A minister's first concern is his parish and, with three different types of congregation under my charge, it took time to assess, organise, and find a way of ministering to them, so it might have been about a year before I felt free to give some time to the local Peace Movement, the Organisation for International Co-operation and Disarmament.

Just as in a parish and, no doubt, in a political party, you have to somehow accommodate to a number of varying trends not always necessarily your cup of tea, so you also do in a Peace Movement.

One Tasmanian minister, prominent in the Adelaide campaign against me, claimed that the Presbyterian system is the finest in the world. Later, as a result of my persecution he felt forced to add "If it worked", much in the spirit of Gandhi who, when asked, "What do you think of western democracy?" answered "It would be a good idea".

The weakness of the O.I.C.D. idea is that it depends on co-operation, which is scarce; and the more we press the idea on people, the more guilty and resentful they feel. So, ultimately, I believe the creation of peace depends on individuals and nations who are willing to disarm themselves unconditionally. - 'risk their all for what is more than all'.

This is not to say the O.I.C.D. was not a success. People are sometimes higher as well as lower than their avowed
principles. Constitutions stiffen as well as move bodies.

Peace-seekers.

At all events it was the most obvious body of peace-seekers around at the time. I had thrown myself energetically into the work of pleading the peace cause in the Press. I also joined and became president of C.I.C.D. Perhaps I should here give the summing-up of the argument I used to help change the minds of people with regard to the war.

Some correspondent in the "Mercury", the Wollongong newspaper, had questioned my dealing with Vietnam, but not with the two World Wars. I pointed out that in the climate of thought when these wars happened, people regarded things differently. The First was an honour-and-glory war on both sides, and afterwards was conceded on both sides to be merely an exercise in plunder reflecting no credit on either side. In the Second War, we went in more thoughtfully. The concept of aggression - later to be formulated and recognised in U.N.C. - had grown. We went in after many countries had gone under the Nazi heel. It was not an isolated case. Hitler was making his point clear.

The Americans came in when they were attacked; though Pearl Harbour is some distance from the American mainland. The case of Korea and Vietnam was different... The Americans attacked Korea before they managed to railroad some sort of a notion against Korea through the United Nations. In Vietnam they never got their war approved by the United Nations. Indeed they earned the condemnation of the world,
not only in the United Nations but in mammoth protests that went on around the world including their own country.

The world was well aware that if Vietnam fell there was scant chance for any other nation. World War Two and the United Nations had truly planted the germ of National Liberation in the world's psyche; and today no-one can reckon without it.

The propaganda that was used in America about Korea and Vietnam was that "The North attacked the South". Even if that had been true, it didn't justify American intervention. This would have made it a civil war. Alternatively, of course, the communist bogey, very powerful in America, was brought in. "The North Attacked the South" argument arose out of the American Civil War when the non-slave-owning North attacked the slave-owning South - to free the slaves. The "North-attacked-the-South" argument, therefore is an argument for slavery, and it's a tragic irony, that the American Government, on the pretext of freeing the Vietnamese was in fact enslaving them.

Another tragedy is that the American slave was has ended and the slaves aren't free yet. There seems to be a leading to an extension of that civil war.

I also referred to the occasion when an Austrian Emperor Maximilian - invaded Mexico, just on the United States border. Abraham Lincoln refused to intervene even on the side of the radical Juarez (Juarez won anyway). This is usually called isolationism, but the intention is to allow nations to
determine their own future. Indeed, it was the spirit of the American Revolt against England in 1776, when they declared their independence.

William Pitt, ex-Prime Minister of England, supported independence even as we support the freedom of Vietnam from within a country that suppresses it. It is the spirit to which the world is returning, for the United Nations insists on the right of men and nations to determine their own lives, and holds that prisoners of war should be treated with humanity and not placed in jeopardy by letting them fall into the hands of forces whose humanity could reasonably be doubted.

War itself is forbidden by the United Nations Charter unless agreed to by ALL of the Big Five: China, America, Russia, France and Britain. During most of this period China was kept out, though that, too, was illegal.

This all seems a circuitous route to a desirable goal, but for those of us who are under Christ's command, and for many others who know that violent action does not produce good, the way is much simpler - and harder.

It is the way of non-violent resistance to the evil of war. Graham Williams, writer in the "Australian", has given some prominence to my case and to the cases of a number of other ministers who suffered degrees of persecution because of their peace stand, or because of other forms of dissent. One very piquant piece was an article called "Christian charity that excludes hair".

Briefly he deals with two Anglican priests who refused to have their hair cut as short as their 'superiors' would
have it, or to require their congregations to do the same. Graham rightly dates this kind of prejudice back to Saint Paul who, although he said nothing about men with long hair (short back and sides is a post World War II deviation) the done thing in those days insisted that hair was a woman's glory and must be covered in Church. A woman who wore no head-dress then was assumed to be a prostitute. The article brings out the psychological dynamite attaching to how or if you cut your hair.

It also deals with the persecution of John Graf, a minister in the Presbyterian Church in Victoria, and myself. John, who had a better distribution of church progressive forces, now has another charge. In both our cases, opposition to the war in Vietnam was the crime.

In my case I was denied a living seven months before my appeal could be heard in Sydney. "In the higher interests of the Kingdom of God", (God must regard me as a very serious threat) and my appeal to the General Assembly of Australia was sidestepped.

Graham's concern is with the fear and collapse of integrity in the Church. Pathetically few ministers become involved in peace or para-political activities - we're still regarded as political eunuchs. Dudley Hyde, the Molongong Methodist minister of the Wesley Methodist Church, Crown Street, was in our group. The Methodist ministry has a reputation for being more peace-conscious than most, with the honourable exception of the Quakers. Even so, the prophets are few. Dudley was very dedicated, but didn't propagand
much in the Iress. When we conducted our Peace Vigil, he kindly offered us the pitch in front of his church to have it. I've no doubt we could have used the inside, too, but the Vigil was intended to be public; also some who supported it did not approve of churches. Thus we found the middle ground.

While Dudley's church was pretty conservative, it was not nearly so intransigent as mine. My elders threatened to "starve me out if I didn't stop arguing for peace" they claimed that demonstrating - like sitting on the floor of the National Service Office - was undignified (they had clearly forgotten some of the indignities early Christians suffered) that I was worth a division of soldiers to the "enemy"; one of then told me somebody would blow a hole in me like they did to Martin Luther King and on one occasion when I went round their houses to attempt to reconcile them, I found them conspiring against me, in one elder's house, Rule book in hand!

Jean Wakefield was the C.I.C.D. Secretary and we met, sometimes in a room in the Town Hall, sometimes in the Trade Union Centre, Station Street.

A group that was strongly united for peace was bound to have less tussles than maybe some others and, by contrast with church meetings, it was really peaceful.

The distribution tended to be Trade Union, communists, humanists, labour, usually left wing labour and church. Australia was then under the onslaught of a movement styling itself the New Left, Trotsky-anarchic in slant, socialism
with a human face, as former Premier Dubcek of Czechoslovakia
dubbed it. For them, Russia was the great enemy, Stalin the
dirty word. History was not its strong point. In this
situation, non-aligned (party-political-wise) Trade Unionists
were the most helpful. The favourite attack, predictably,
on the movement was that it was communist inspired or
dominated.

The anti-red gibes of Sir Robert Menzies (the pig-ron
knight) still stuck like a bindi in the Australian hide.
This attack almost ensured that none except communists dare
stand for peace. Thus the propaganda would have seemed to
justify itself. Almost. The "New Left" later grew among
the communists too and, after the Russo-Czech dispute,
this group could plead that it was anti-Russia, though not
always anti-communist, but for those who simply stood for
peace and the right of all nations to rule themselves,
beginning with out withdrawal from Vietnam, there was no mercy.

Christians suffered from the grim paradox that Australians
couldn't quite believe a Christian, particularly a minister,
could stand for peace.

I suffered the severest economic sanction in the shape
of four years' without financial help from the Presbyterian
Church. This continues. The New South Wales General Assembly
meekly obeyed the elders who threatened starvation. The Steel
works black-listed me. I had been threatened with eviction in
Adelaide, but withstood it. The Presbyterian Church in New
South Wales had an eviction order against me delivered to me
personally. The firm employed by the Church lawyers was called piquantly, Messrs. Hunt and Hunt of Hunter Street, Sydney.

This scarcely needs underlining. The New South Wales General Assembly, irregularly refused my appeal to the General Assembly of Australia, the highest Australian Presbyterian court. It still claims not to know how my "sacking" (you can't sack a minister) could have been prevented.

After the "execution" in May, 1969, a certain minister's wife - not mine - summed it up as follows:

"The Church has no machinery to deal with this kind of thing. Let's go to tea".

That's the official explanation. You're not asked to believe it.

So I had four years of Church unemployment - still uncompensated - and in fact only the casual employment that peace-loving trade unionists could get me. After I had got a commission flat, I heard that the disaffected people in the church circulated a petition asking that I be removed from the town. The council rejected it.

The Australian Government regards a man as the family support - until he's unemployed, in which case they grant the weaker vessel the proud privilege of supporting him. The Presbyterian Church, as I have shown, apparently does not believe one of its ministers who supports peace, should live at all. Church and Government shamelessly cannot in the mute lie that you can't really be unemployed in the "lucky country".

For reasons quite different from those of Church and State, my wife supported my ideas and me.
A most important factor in the campaign was the support of the Trade Union Movement and its adoption of the slogan:

"Peace is Trade Union business" I go further: Peace is everybody's business.

Some trade union leaders, like ministers were blasted because of their interest in peace. It was argued that peace is not an industrial issue, that a trade union is merely concerned with maintaining and improving the conditions of the working lives of its members. This is, of course, the classic definition. However, it has to be remembered, and the case was put, that if trade unionists are taken away from their work to engage in dirty wars, this is not helping their conditions, nor those of anyone else.

Also the war effort, even if it could be justified, is a loss of the worker's productive effort. He is not only working to live and to help general standards, his productive effort is reduced by keeping soldiers in idleness or wastefully occupied, and the money and goods directed to arms are sheer waste to this country and to the country they are directed against. Thus was is a direct loss and misuse of the productive forces of the world.

So peace is eminently Trade Union business, and the South Coast Trades and Labour Council adopted this as a definite policy. "When the wheels stop turning", as Fred Watson used to say, "they'll know we mean business".

About the time Chris Gerrand came over from Melbourne, a new body sprouted called the South Coast Citizens against Conscription (S.C.C.A.C.). It did the sort of things C.I.C.D. and S.O.S. were doing, but with a particular emphasis on
Conscription and Youth. Young and old were all needed.

The only point of significance about this body was that, since thorough-going socialists tended to hold very strongly to conscription, with the aim of directing it themselves when in power, a strong danger exists that they will therefore support it in wartime. For example, some people in the Peace Movement actually favoured the idea of offering industrial labour in remote parts of Australia as an alternative to conscription into the army. Conscription was for twenty-year-old youths, by birthday and the luck of the draw.

Obviously this assumed a right on the part of the Government to conscript youths and was the precise policy we were struggling against.

Australians were in a very supine frame of mind at that time; but the awakening was coming. The mind of the people had to be changed. Too many young men went to war simply because they were told.

S.C.C.A.C. canalised the growing feeling of resistance to war which we had been fostering through O.I.C.D. and S.C.S. and the various propaganda devices.

Nothing is sadder than the creation of splinter movements round the same basic question. In the event, people of widely differing view-points will find themselves in the same movement, no matter what it is called. For example, there grew a school of thought in the Peace Movement which held that people had a right to object to particular wars, and not object to others. That was the view of Louie Christcfides. I don't agree with it. To me it is just a variant of the Just War, and there is no just war —
there is just bloody war. This didn't prevent Louie and I agreeing about any aspect of policy I can think of.

While the C.I.C.D. technically condemned the Russian Invasion of Czechoslovakia, I didn't regard it as our business, though it proved an excellent red herring. The majority in this country and in America voted against it; but we didn't get out of Vietnam, nor did we invade Russia. Do we only liberate countries when we think we can get away with it? By our fruits we are known.

Comparable to S.C.C.A.C. was the Moratorium in the sense that it also was a variation on a theme. 'Morari' is the Latin for to delay, and that was the aim of the Movement - to call a moratorium on the war - to enable people to think again free from the heat of conflict. Time to persuade people to disengage.

In the present climate of thought this seems quite a mild proposal but to some it appeared revolutionary at the time.

Let it not be thought that the Labour Party was completely for withdrawal. Many were calling Vietnam a non-issue yet it brought Labour to victory in the Federal elections. Only the Labour Left dared to be in it. Dr. Jim Cairns was doing excellent work in Melbourne on the same lines as ours. I was fortunate to get a job teaching at Warilla High School before I was removed by the Illawarra Presbytery. Later I received a letter from Mr. Verco, N.S.W. Education Minister, saying I would not be allowed to teach again - in the world presumably. Warm-hearted trade unionists helped me with employment. Once on the
Council I had a foreman who made a point of not telling me what to do and the complaining that I didn't show sufficient interest in my work. You've no idea how interesting Council work is!

I also had an invitation home to Scotland from a niece. The holiday was wonderful but I didn't find a satisfactory settlement - gossip caught up with me. The Yollongong Peace Movement kindly brought me back here last Christmas. In thanking them for this I should also like to thank all those who gave financial gifts in my four year period in the wilderness (when I needed them badly). I believe it was once stated (I never listen to Talk-back) that I took money myself intended for the Church. In fact it was the reverse. At first I gave all the money I was given, to the Church until donors insisted the gifts were meant for me. Then only did I accept them. While these gifts were kindly meant and helpful, it took a long time before I found a living.

Now I come to the sad moment of the disbanding of the Vigil. It took place, like so many of our meetings, in the Rest Park on the 4th July, 1969 - Independence from America Day as we then called it. We read part of the American Declaration of Independence; the Arbroath Declaration of Scottish Independence, and part of Magna Carta. Mary led in songs of peace:

"Were you there when they crucified my Lord?"

"We shall overcome".

"Let my people go".

I also included for Australia, Henry Lawson's couplet, which is as up-to-date now as then:
"When they gaol a man for striking
It's a rich man's country yet".

"I don't like funerals", I said at the time "and perhaps
this one least of all",

Finally, to the fervant singing of "Auld Lang Syne", hands
clasped, we dispersed.

It was the end of a wonderful experience.

Since my period in the wilderness I have been savouring the freedom out of which all other freedoms grow - the freedom to earn a living. The struggle for peace, leisure, and a better quality of life goes on......