SLOGANS OR STRATEGIES

Most disarmament activists believe that Australia will remain in the nuclear firing line so long as there are foreign military installations on our territory. The problem is how to remove those installations. PHILIP HIND proposes a debate on strategy and offers his ideas.

United States bases have emerged as the major focus of the disarmament movement in Australia, at least among its more militant sections.

The bases are seen by many as the most concrete Australian expression of the more general threat of nuclear war — the closest thing we have to missiles in our own backyard. They also have quite demonstrable links with the "warfighting" arsenals and strategies of the nuclear powers. Last but not least, the removal of bases is seen by some as the most militant of the demands that an Australian movement can make.

The bases are not just a nuclear issue. Challenging the presence of the bases is also seen as a means for confronting head-on the forces of US militarism and reaction in Australia. Simultaneously, so the argument continues, this challenge will expose the inherent weakness of social-democratic solutions.

However, while this approach has great appeal to the left, it has failed thus far to answer the central political question which any movement must face: how, in the concrete circumstances of today, can a concrete strategy be devised capable of achieving its aims. More specifically, how can we break the deep ideological and cultural identification that the great mass of Australians have with the bases, ANZUS and the Western Alliance?

We need a thorough-going analysis of the political and social context in which the bases issue has to be put forward. The prescription of sloganised solutions is simple; the path to mass activity is complex and more qualified.

There are three premises which I take as fundamental for such an analysis and for a real reckoning of where the movement must head:

• Without mass popular support the bases cannot be removed either individually or collectively. Support for their removal at present does not exist in anywhere near the right measure, despite the relative strengths of the recent Australia-wide disarmament mobilisations. Hence we must look to the building of support through a 5-10 year program, a minimum at best.

• There will be many steps and stages along the way to reaching our objective. Clearly, our ultimate objective is the removal of all nuclear-related bases from Australia. But a strategy based on existing, concrete realities and oriented towards generating ever higher levels of public support is essential. It is illusory to think — as is suggested by some people’s blind faith — that a wave of mass protest will emerge which will drive the Americans into the sea, or force a government to order the bases shut overnight. If we fail to enunciate what intermediate steps must be taken, we will have no bearings by which to gauge the success of our campaigns or to help people face the difficulties we will unavoidable face.

• The movement must find its expression within the formal and parliamentary political arena, as well as beyond. While it is necessary to theorise and organise for the development of a mass movement as a broad and political independent phenomena, this is not sufficient. The movement must ultimately fight for changes and implementation of particular policies within governments. Alienation from, and hostility towards, this arena will likely find the movement frustrated at later stages. In particular, then, we must determine how the movement will be able to
influence a Labor government and now it will judge the actions of the same in the meantime.

Starting from these premises, it is difficult to find common ground with those people who pose the debate about strategy in terms of unswerving adherence to the slogan: "US Bases Out". The slogan, in fact, becomes a substitute for a strategy. It poses (falsely) only one possible demand at any point in time: anything less represents a "sell-out". Furthermore, the question of removing the bases can then be reduced (by the same adherents of this position) to mere "mechanical" considerations of whether violence or non-violent direct action is the best "method" by which people can be won over. In crude terms, the basic line of reasoning becomes: when enough arrests have been batoned and enough agitation has taken place, the day of the big showdown will come. The slogan will become reality: US Bases Out!

At one level at least, there is no real argument in the movement: the removal of nuclear bases is the explicit objective of the greater part of the disarmament movement. The only substantive question (and difference) revolves around the question — how can the bases be removed?

A campaign to remove the bases will surely be a long one. It already has a twenty-year history — another ten may be looking at things optimistically. To sustain the movement, we need to develop intermediate and achievable targets. We need to avoid creating an all or nothing situation — urgent and necessary though the removal of all bases is.

I have identified four possible intermediate steps, or what might better be called "campaign directions". All deserve far more detailed thought and debate within the movement than they have received so far. In some cases they have scarcely been considered at all; others have fared only slightly better. None may yet prove to be appropriate; still others might be added.

The building of greater support — beyond those who already accept opposition to bases as an article of faith — is essential. It requires an opening of horizons, and a challenge to old ideas, that are deep set within the Australian popular consciousness.

Here are some possible campaign directions:

• A moratorium on the bases.

This simple concept is based on calling for an immediate halt to the upgrading or extension of existing bases and refusing the addition of any new bases.

Such a campaign would already have a very broad potential base for popular appeal. In terms of political parties, it could be palatable to wide sections of the ALP, the Democrats and could possibly win some Liberal supporters.

The concept has an immediacy and simplicity about it without invoking all the "hard" issues of the American Alliance. Its links with the "freeze" movement in the US are obvious and could help break the anti-American bogey the movement is continually burdened with on the bases issue.

In itself, it would be a clear political statement by Australia indicating our opposition to any further escalation of the arms race.

• A single-base focus.

In this case the movement nationally would focus on a single base and make that the frontline of attack and key mobilising point for the movement.

A focus of this sort could have two purposes: (i) to bring special awareness and concern in popular, consciousness about a single installation, and (ii) to pick on a base, which seems to be the "weakest link".

North West Cape is not the only possibility. But it does suggest itself, in ways that others do not, in terms of its overwhelming strategic importance, and clear-cut connections with the arms race.

It is a prime communications base for nuclear submarines; a vehicle for first-strike strategy; a priority nuclear target; an installation that has strategic significance for the Indian and Pacific Oceans; and it plays a nuclear role which is relatively easy to explain.

North West Cape has already been acknowledged by the present Labor government as a problem requiring special measures to make it more acceptable. Statements of reservation and concern have been expressed by leading ALP spokespersons and some state branches. Reservation has specifically centred around the possible "derogation of Australian sovereignty" associated with the base; specifically the fact that communications involving war alert and command could be signalled without Australia’s knowledge (as occurred during the Yom Kippur War in 1973). Unfortunately, this real problem has been momentarily pushed aside with the Hawke government’s somewhat amusing plan (now agreed to by the Americans) to place an Australian liaison officer in the Pentagon. I don’t think anyone will be surprised if this poor soul isn’t consulted prior to the start of WWIII!

On the more promising side, a recent statement by Senator Ryan said that a base like NW Cape could only be supported insofar as it serves to maintain "deterrence".

There are gaping holes in the publicly stated justification of NW Cape which the disarmament movement — if it exploits them carefully — ought to be able to drive a
Such a campaign focus would not mean ignoring the other bases or allowing their respective roles to be played down. However, in determining political priorities and concentrating energies, NW Cape could become the sustained focus of the Australia-wide movement.

**Internationalising the bases.**

Several existing bases could, under different conditions, assist in the international monitoring and verification of disarmament. A campaign to place the surveillance and reconnaissance functions (of either or both Pine Gap or Nurrungar) under international control could have this as its aim.

For many years the primary argument advanced by the US to explain and justify these bases is their role in monitoring the military capabilities, preparedness and movements of Soviet forces. The Americans say they help “make deterrence work”. (The fact that they also enhance the first strike capability of the US is conveniently avoided.)

Existing arms control treaties, like SALT I and the Partial Test Ban Treaty, are also partly served by information gathered from such systems.

However, the argument can be turned against those who advocate it. If the bases have functions which are essential to “nuclear stability”, verification and the monitoring of treaties or crises, why not place them under international control where all countries can benefit and judge the facts for themselves? If “dis”-armament based on international acceptance, rather than “arms control” based on superpower deals, is to become a reality, then won’t such systems of monitoring and verification need to be available?

One proposal along these lines was put forward by the French to the First UN Special Session on Disarmament in 1978. Under the project name of the International Satellite Monitoring Agency (ISMA), the proposal has already been the subject of a United Nations report in which a team of international experts adjudged it to be both technically and financially feasible.

Fundamentally, the proposal still requires political support and it will be necessary for it to become the subject of real action. A progressive Australian government, bent on advancing disarmament internationally, while loosening its own nuclear connection, would be well placed to play an active part in just such a process. Indeed, whether the proposal became a reality or not, its serious debate in the Australian political context would serve to open wholly new ground for the movement. Several things could develop in the course of such a campaign:

(i) it would give an anti-bases campaign a very positive and active disarmament content and would also link us internationally to a solution to the arms race, rather than simply “opting out”;

(ii) it would help pull the rug out from under the US in terms of their public legitimisation for Pine Gap and Nurrungar. It would tend to force into public argument the “warfighting” capacity of these bases (as opposed to “war-deterring” roles); and behind that their CIA functions;

(iii) it would be a very useful counter to A campaign to review the alliance might base itself initially around a demand for a public inquiry or national debate in which the two conditions — non-nuclear functions and Australian sovereignty — become the terms of reference. Alternatively, one might envisage a scenario in which a progressive Labor government is encouraged to fight an election campaign based on a commitment to renegotiating ANZUS along these lines.

This would be a radically different exercise than the “review and strengthening” of the ANZUS Treaty conducted by Prime Minister Hawke in Washington recently. It would reject the notion of “nuclear deterrence” and distance Australia from the Big Brother approach to questions of global and regional security.

The underlying basis of such a campaign’s success would lie in its ability to tap the anti-nuclear, nationalist and independence aspirations of the Australian people. But it would need to do so without simultaneously feeding people’s real fears about a “defenceless” Australia; or of the Soviet threat; or without throwing into question Australia’s long-standing cultural and economic links with the West.

In the broader view of things, it may become apparent over time that it is only possible to launch such a campaign simultaneously with putting forward a strategy for an alternative and independent defence policy for Australia. If this were so, the peace movement will need to become part of an effort to build a “progressive consensus” in the community along these lines. In short, a campaign to remove the bases and to renegotiate Australia’s role in the ANZUS alliance would also be a campaign for an independent Australian defence force and posture. (Such a defence capability could arguably be built along conventional lines around the concept of “Fortress Australia” and might also incorporate some elements of the more unconventional “social” defence approach.)

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"It is illusory to think that a wave of mass protest will emerge which will drive the Americans into the sea, or force a government to order the bases shut overnight."
Many people on the left and within the more militant sections of the disarmament movement are fervently pushing for the whole question of the alliance, and our unconditional withdrawal from it, to be placed high on the movement's agenda now. In one sense, this is nothing new: it has always been part and parcel of left programs and a recurring theme within the peace movement since World War II.

Despite the current growth of the disarmament movement, the gap between demands, programmatic exhortations and protest actions on the one hand, and the real attachments that the broad mass of Australian people feel towards our nuclear Big Brother, on the other, is yet to be seriously bridged.

To find a way out of this contradictory reality demands fresh thinking about some well-established principles. The movement needs to assert certain fundamentals which can readily gain wide support, without being side-tracked into a blind anti-Americanism or taking on board more ideological baggage than is appropriate to the circumstances.

I would suggest the fundamentals which are capable of winning mass support and breaking down the Big Brother syndrome include the following:

(i) opposition to the nuclear arms race — Australia’s express desire not to contribute to its further escalation and our commitment to its reversal;

(ii) our sovereign right to determine when, whether and how war is made on our soil;

(iii) our belief that the ANZUS Treaty of 1951 carried within it no necessary compulsion for Australia to accept a nuclear servicing role “in exchange” for our defence; and

(iv) a belief that the dangers associated with the presence of US bases on our soil are inconsistent with our real defence needs and threaten the livelihood of all Australians.

Against this sort of background, there could be some real thinking about strategic directions and concrete actions for the movement. Without it we remain confined within the antinomy of a pious, yet ineffectual, leftism; we risk parenting a disarmament movement with vision but little long-term support.

Let the debate begin in earnest.

*An early anti-base demonstration at Omega, Eastern Gippsland.*

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