

FARINGDON PEACE GROUP

At its meeting on 2nd September the Faringdon Peace Group heard Symon Hill, journalist and activist, claim, that "War isn't Normal". He asked whether the principle, established in the circumstances of conscription during World War 1, of conscientious objection to military service did not lead us to think about the extent to which governments and society's prevailing climate treat war as 'normal' and the conscientious objectors as the 'the only ones out of step'.

We, the general public, make our contribution to war preparations and war actions through our taxes. Even if not liable to pay any income tax, we all buy goods with VAT charged and contribute to the substantial military expenditure of all countries (UK 6th largest in the world in 2014 - Stockholm International Peace Research Institute). We are all 'conscripted'.

Today army recruitment in Britain is continuous in spite of the reductions in the armed service numbers. Army visits to schools are targeted to less prosperous areas of the country, TV advertising highlights the adventure, and funds have been made available for the expansion of cadet forces into the state sector of our school system. Boys can still join at 16, with parental consent, or at 18, with a four-page contract of service that many of them cannot be expected to read. Over 50% of army recruits have a reading age of under 11 years. Are our soldiers also the victims of war?

We can easily fall into the conversations and language that makes war seem normal.

The War Office, originating in the C17th, became the Ministry of 'Defence' in 1964.

The controversial Trident nuclear weapons system is so frequently justified by officials and the media as essential to our 'security' that the fact that the majority of the population when canvassed oppose it seems to make no difference. If challenged the response is often, as with all the arms industry and its exports, that we need the jobs and that they are essential for the economy. However, several studies have suggested ways of converting these industries away from armaments without the collapse of employment. On a more subtle level we speak of 'our' army, 'our' security, and slip into a nationalistic or tribal stance where our loyalty to our nation or cause becomes more to us than our concern for humanity.

It is not easy even for those seeking peace to escape the feeling that 'something must be done'. The current calls for intervention in Syria or the trouble spots in the Middle East by bombing raids or now boots on the ground as a response to the desperation of refugees and the flow of people into Europe is evidence enough. But is sending in the army merely throwing the fuel of violence on the present fire rather than attempting to face the complex issues that are at the heart of the crisis.

Symon's talk was followed by a lively discussion and it was decided that a letter be sent to the Prime Minister from the Group that Britain should accept its fair share of refugees seeking safety in Europe.

John Cottis