

Taking non-violent direct action Paul Milling

At the time of writing this (May 2003) I'm 57 years old, married and I have two daughters, one step-daughter and two step-sons aged between 21 and 33 and all living away from home. For 12 years I was a city councillor in York and for 10 years a Justice of the Peace (a kind of voluntary, unqualified judge if you haven't come across one before). In the past I've run my own little businesses, along with quite a few different jobs over the years, so basically I'm a fairly ordinary middle-class white Anglo-Saxon.

Where has Quakerism fitted into my life?

I began my adult life as an active member of the Church of England but by my early twenties I was having my doubts about the meaning, if any, of 'sin' and I was finding the rituals of the services getting in the way of my religious beliefs. As life developed in interesting ways (hitch-hiking to Australia, career, marriage, children) my visible religious life faded away. My second wife, Rachael is a life-long Quaker and about eight years ago suggested we might go to Meeting in York. As I tend to say all too frequently to anyone who will listen - it was like coming home - I'd been a Quaker most of my life without knowing it! I became a Member at high speed and when we moved to Birmingham, we ended up here at Cotteridge Meeting.

Why am I an activist?

The day I became an activist was the day that George Bush became the President of the United States of America. It may sound overly dramatic, but on the day I said to my wife 'here comes World War Three' - a prediction which the invasion of Iraq has brought several steps closer, in my opinion.

I suppose it's also true that in one way or another I always have been an activist - it's just that I used to do it *inside* the legal system. As a local councillor and as a magistrate I felt I was giving something back to the society in which I was living a pretty good life. I also felt that in some small way I was helping people with their individual problems and also having some small say in improving the 'rules' within which we live.

While all that was - and is - true, what I soon found out is that all the real levers that control our society are in the hands of the government. What it took me quite a lot longer to realise is that no government - of whatever political persuasion - actually *listens* to people. They are elected representing a few values in which the majority believe and mistake this for the right to enforce *all* the values in which they believe. Consultation does take place but arguments against any government's beliefs are 'mistaken'. If this sounds like a deeply cynical attitude that's because it is - but it's based on experience.

In practice what this means is that change through democratic means can be very, very slow. Fair enough, you might say - and usually so would I - but on some issues there isn't the time. We've seen this with global warming, where it may well be too late. I don't want that to be the case with the things I care about - so I use illegal methods to prevent the things I believe to be morally wrong happening.

Active about what?

Basically, I decided to work towards the prevention of war and the eradication of the single most likely world-killing weapons I know - nuclear weapons. On both of these issues I believe all UK governments have not and do not listen to the majority view unless forced to. Which left me with the question - how do you work towards the prevention of war and the use of nuclear weapons? So I did the thing I do - I joined an organisation, two in fact - the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and [Trident Ploughshares](#) (TP). TP is a group of people willing to take direct action against the British nuclear weapons system - the Trident nuclear submarines.

As a Quaker any action I took part in had to be non-violent and both CND and TP have non-violence built into their constitutions - I think the TP non-violence training process (which everyone has to do before they are allowed on an action) is interesting enough to describe a bit further down. So I did the training and I've been an active campaigner for the last three years or so - most recently against the invasion of Iraq. The description and comment below are by my co-accused Margaret Jones, who's a much better writer than I am:

"As we walked the road beside the fences at Fairford U.S. Air Force base one Sunday in January, everyone was talking about what the B-52 bombers to be stationed there would do to the people of Iraq. Some of us wondered what anyone could do about it - Paul and I both felt we wanted to try and prevent what we feared would be terrible loss of life.

"What if we damaged the support system of the planes, so as to delay their taking off? The trucks that carry the bombs to the B-52 bombers were out in an open yard, for all to see. Up a slope across the road, behind a chain link fence and a few coils of razor wire, one could see fuel tankers. If the trucks couldn't load the bombs and the planes couldn't be re-fuelled, wouldn't that slow them down a bit? Enough to allow a few Iraqi civilians time to gather up their kids and their belongings, and beg a lift out of Baghdad before the blitz started? It seemed worth a go. Just after seven one March evening, Paul and I slipped into the bomb truck compound. We cut a lot of brake pipes, on maybe twenty-odd vehicles. Some grinding paste went into a petrol tanker two and we put notices on some of the trucks. These read, "Out of Order - Do Not Use" and "Prevent War Crime." Then we left for our other target on another part of the airfield.

"This was also amazingly easy to reach. There were three tankers in the compound - with their cabs unlocked. Two of them even had their ignition keys in the

dashboard. We opened the door of the nearest cab and worked over the windows and dashboard with our hammers, quite systematically. We made what seemed like a lot of noise - but no one came - and so we each took on a second cab and then a third. When we had finished, all three were wrecked completely.

"Just as we were walking away from our handiwork, a shadow fell across the ground and around the corner came a young American soldier - who, when he saw us, was clearly more scared than we were. After all, we had been expecting someone to turn up - he hadn't. To his credit, he kept his gun pointed at the ground as he gabbled orders into his radio. We dropped our tools and stood against a shed, we told him (a) that we were peaceable, and (b) that there were only two of us. He called up his mates, and they ran all over the yard - looking under vehicles - shouting - probably freaked by the thought of what their commanding officer would say about the damage (It's claimed to be worth about \$18,000 - plus eight cents. This could be right - I don't know much about trucks.) "Do you consider yourself a terrorist?" "Do you hate Americans?" were two of the questions the M.o.D. police asked Paul and me, after our arrest - we were happy to be able to answer "No" to both.

"We were encouraged to hear that just before the B-52s went out to bomb Baghdad, they had to be re-fuelled in the air over Northern England, before flying back to Fairford - so perhaps we did buy people in Iraq just a little bit of time? I would like to think so."

At Paul and Janet's first trial the jury failed to return a verdict. At their second trial the jury gave a guilty verdict to conspiracy. The judge gave the accused suspended sentences.

Quakerism and activism.

It is, I think, generally accepted within Quakerism that the individual Quaker has the right to refuse to obey a law that they see as against God's law. On this basis there is a long history within Quakerism of a refusal to act - conscientious objection to military service being one of them, refusal to be taxed for military purposes another - which has led to imprisonment from the beginnings of Quakerism right up to recent times.

The American Quakers who smuggled slaves from the south to the north of America - from slavery to freedom - were going one step further into active breaking of the law. Given that the slaves were 'property' at the time this was also theft (hard to believe that people were once property isn't it?)

What is also true is that these actions have not been unanimously supported by Quakers at the time they first appeared and were and are often the acts of only a few Quakers. Some Quakers once owned slaves, for example. It is against this background that I think - I hope - we are at the beginning of a new acceptance that it is valid within Quakerism for an individual to go yet one step further and actively prevent the operation of a law they see as against God's law. This may sound a small change, but it

represents a move towards a yet more 'active' role - from a refusal to go to war to the active (non-violent) destruction of the means of war. This 'active' view is the one I hold - and although I have had tremendous support from Cotteridge Meeting and Warwickshire Monthly Meeting and many individuals within them I wouldn't want you to think it is a view universally held within Quakerism in Britain.

Training for non-violent activism.

You may well have read the section above mentioning non-violent destruction and thought "not possible, surely, how can it be both destruction and non-violent?" My answer being - it depends on how you define violence. Here's a list of actions - which of these are violent?

- Standing with placards and leaflets asking people to sign a petition.
- Painting "Don't attack Iraq" on the window of an army recruitment office.
- Throwing a Molotov cocktail into an empty building on a military base.
- A line of police officers at a demo - you have the chance to handcuff two together.
- Throwing an empty lemonade can at the line of police.
- Chanting abuse at the line of police.
- Lying in the entrance road to a military base, blocking it.
- Lying on a main road in your home town, blocking it.
- Going on hunger strike until the troops are withdrawn from Iraq.

Did you think I was going to tell you? Nope! Here's a clue - it's the effect on people - all people - that matter to me.

One good game if there are a group of you is to take one scenario - say chanting abuse at a line of police officers - and place yourself on a line of opinions across the room from 'non-violent' to 'very violent'. Then discuss why you are standing where you are. This can take hours but don't let it get violent!