

Peace and Freedom

Phoebe's spectacular success with the Düsseldorf link confirmed her faith in what she termed 'my growing internationalism'.

Like all good Labour pioneers, Phoebe had always believed in the need to work for the good of all humanity, and not just the people of her town or country. Now she had demonstrated to everyone that ordinary people (and she always considered herself to be ordinary) could achieve great things beyond the frontiers of their own countries.

The international climate was right for it. The United Nations had just been formed, and the heady post-war idealism, for those who shared it, encompassed the whole world. The Iron Curtain (Churchill's phrase) had already fallen across Europe, but to people like Phoebe that was merely a reason to try harder.

While she was still Mayor, she had lent her wholehearted support to the World Government Movement of Henry Osborne, the new Labour MP for Acocks Green in Birmingham. Osborne's vision was for a union of peoples rather than nations, and he dreamed of an assembly in Geneva that would consist of one representative for every million people in the world.

The local secretary was Margaret Salzmann, Labour councillor and women's rights campaigner; and she and Phoebe booked the Town Hall for a 'Mass Meeting'. Phoebe used her position as Mayor – unsuccessfully – to solicit 'big-name' speakers such as J B Priestley, Eleanor Roosevelt (then in England), and Lord Boyd-Orr, first Director-General of the United Nation's Food and Agricultural Organisation.

In view of the rapidly deteriorating international situation there is an ever-growing apprehension in the minds of many people about the maintenance of peace in this atomic age, and a number of Reading organisations feel it urgently necessary to arouse a sense of individual responsibility for international relations amongst our citizens,

she wrote to him in September 1947; but Orr declined the invitation.

His World Food Plan had just been rejected by the UN, and his enthusiasm for World Government in any shape or form was no doubt considerably diminished.

In the end, the meeting was addressed by Usborne and by Ian Mikardo, who had his own doubts; and soon afterwards the World Government movement itself faded away. Chastened, Phoebe came to believe that the right sort of politics was an essential prerequisite of global government: 'My own personal opinion is that...the world must ultimately accept international *democratic socialism*', she wrote ten years later. 'Then world government might be possible'.

Her next venture was little more successful. World government might not be possible, but to Phoebe world peace certainly was; and she now threw herself into the cause of peace with the same whole-hearted conviction that she had given to Labour in its early days.

By now she had become an active and influential member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, which she had joined in 1942 at the behest of Mignon Castle. In July 1948 she persuaded that august body to convene a meeting of some twenty-five women's organisations, who came together as a result of the 'great anxiety' they all felt at 'the persistent rumours of a third world war'.

From this meeting the Women's Peace Movement emerged, its objects 'to co-ordinate the peace activities of women's' organisations...women form a majority of the electorate...we believe that women's' biological function gives them a very special interest in the question of war and peace'.

Phoebe served as Chairman, and she used her Reading network to get the Movement moving. Sixty-eight Reading women signed up to pledge themselves 'to do something practical about peace', and in January held a meeting with which Phoebe pronounced herself to be 'very pleased indeed'.

A month later, the WPM held a major meeting at Westminster Central Hall. The speakers included veteran suffragist Lady Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, Dr Kathleen Lonsdale, (Professor of Crystallography at University College, soon to become a close friend of Phoebe's), and Vera Brittain, whose views on the Great War ('the world was mad and we were all victims') had inspired a generation.

'It is ideas that make history and we need never be afraid', Lady Emmeline told the conference. 'Fear is the only enemy. Go forward in the belief that war will be abolished'. Vera Brittain paid tribute to the Düsseldorf link: 'I know from experience what an immense difference to international relationships was made by a comparatively small piece of help of that kind'.

A resolution was passed, deploring the lack of women at the United

Nations; a deputation was sent to meet the British Foreign Minister. A further conference on World Truce was held, addressed by H N Brailsford; speakers addressed meetings all over the country. There were plans to produce a quarterly bulletin, and to hold a mass meeting in Trafalgar Square; and a London office was rented.

Yet within three months the Movement fell apart. There were accusations of political bias: most of the speakers at Central Hall were known left-wing sympathisers. The twenty-five constituent organisations showed little interest in further involvement, practical or financial, and the secretary resigned.

In July, Phoebe wrote to Lady Emmeline, the President, to wind it up:

I still feel that there is a need for such a Movement and I hate to have to admit failure of the project which I was mainly responsible for originating; but we have to admit that we have not struck the imagination of enough people – largely I think because there is no fundamental agreement in principle amongst the co-operating societies; because some of them fight shy of any but conventional methods; and because some are afraid of being labelled ‘communist’ or ‘pacifist’.

It was a convincing analysis, although she could have added that organisations which rely on volunteers rarely have the will or manpower to participate properly in other organisations.

Thereafter, Phoebe resolved to concentrate her efforts for world peace by working through the WILPF itself.

‘I attended the 1949 Congress in Copenhagen and was privileged to chair one or two of the sessions. It was there that Lord Boyd Orr made a wonderful speech in which, incidentally, he praised the work of the WILPF and said that if all women would join it there would soon be peace in the world’. Phoebe took his faith in the WILPF to heart, and dedicated much of the next twenty years and more to revitalising the organisation.

The Women’s’ International League for Peace and Freedom was a curious body. Its origins were radical enough. An international Women’s Suffrage Conference, scheduled for 1914, was delayed by the outbreak of the First World War. Next year, a thousand women attended the Women’s’ Peace Conference at The Hague, often in defiance of their national governments (only 25 of the 180 British delegates were allowed to leave the country).

Thereafter the League grew from strength to strength. In 1918, they warned the world about the dangers of the Versailles Treaty, which hammered the defeated Axis powers, and during the 1920s spoke out loudly about the perils of growing German anti-semitism. The British Section called for decolonisation in Ireland and India, and in 1926 supported the General Strike

with a spectacular parade in the centre of London.

The League was strongest in America, where it had begun (in 1959, well over half the total membership was American.) During the Fifties, the US Section opposed the Korean War and the apparatus of McCarthyism, supported the Civil Rights movement in the South, and in 1957 delivered a 10,000-name petition against nuclear testing to the White House.

Elsewhere, however, the organisation was in marked decline by the time that Phoebe joined; mirroring the uncertainties of the post-war world, in which only America, the new super-power, had the confidence of its convictions, for League members to support or to oppose as the situation demanded. In Britain and in other countries, the League's work had been taken up by younger organisations, or not at all. Its membership was ageing, its numbers in decline, and its organisation riven by personality clashes.

Such details were unimportant to Phoebe, however, who saw the League as a unique instrument for world peace. 'I have the strongest possible international spirit and an ardent desire to see every country closely associated and co-operating with our International', she told a colleague in 1952, after the acrimony of that year's WILPF Conference. 'In the present state of world affairs it is vitally important that we should act boldly and persistently as a corporate body of women citizens of the world.'

Next year, Phoebe was elected to be one of two International Vice-Chairmen, a position that gave her a chance to put things to rights within the organisation. It also gave her 'a much-needed absorbing interest' after Albert's death, as she said, 'and the knowledge that this was an extension of our work for peace which he would have warmly approved and supported.'

In the late summer of 1952, when the dust had barely settled on the *Reading Citizen*, Phoebe took over the editorship of *Peace and Freedom*, the magazine of the British Section, and was soon on her way to transforming it into an influential and respectable forum for intelligent debate, with contributions from the knowledgeable in every issue. 'It really is a wonderful piece of work', a member wrote to her in praise of the May 1954 edition: 'contacting Japanese, Indians, Nigerians, Americans as well as succeeding in obtaining articles from experienced English people!'

But Phoebe's new-found status, instead of praise, brought her only indifference and even some resentment from those who had been involved with the League since its heyday. 'There is so much urgent work to be done that we cannot afford to waste time on unfriendliness', she wrote to one such critic in July 1954. 'I only want to serve and I certainly do not want 'lime-light'.'

Next month, Phoebe presided over an administrative shake-up, designed to spread the workload more evenly, and to make it possible to build up the

membership. 'We need more sections and they need more support', she wrote; but her actions merely stirred up more ill-feeling. Already she was 'devoting nearly all my time' to the League, but the Head Office in Geneva was in danger of collapse, and Phoebe found herself getting more and more involved in resolving its arcane administration.

The League's international magazine, *Pax et Libertas*, was abandoned by its editor on the eve of the 40th Anniversary issue in April 1955, and Phoebe stepped in at the last minute to fill the breach. For eighteen months Phoebe edited both magazines, until, in November 1956, a new editor was found for *Peace and Freedom*. Thereafter she concentrated all her efforts on *Pax et Libertas*, which over the next thirteen years she developed into a well-informed and thoughtful quarterly, pursuing every new approach towards resolving world conflict with articles contributed by the leading thinkers of her day.

The League's financial problems continued to plague its work in general, and that of Phoebe in particular. Money was a blind spot to the League's hierarchy, who had not adjusted to the realities of its declining membership. The United Nations observer drew a salary, and there were the costs of the Geneva office to bear, yet in April 1955 Phoebe was 'shocked' to discover that there was 'not enough money even for an administrator, or even to meet its liabilities'. For a while in 1956, she took over the administration herself, and organised that year's WILPF Conference in Birmingham.

'The problems seem almost insoluble', she wrote to her friend Mildred Scott Olmsted in Pennsylvania in the summer of 1955. 'It is so difficult to do what one feels to be essential to the health and, indeed, the survival of the WILPF without seeming to be unfriendly to *persons*'.

Money for *Pax* came erratically and unpredictably, and already in September 1956 Phoebe was threatening to resign if the situation wasn't resolved. 'I like the job and do not want to give it up, but...it is impossible to produce a good paper when there is no guarantee that requested articles will appear'.

Yet through it all, Phoebe's faith in the League and its potential remained undiminished. 'We feel that a positive approach (the desire to work for our principles) is better than the negative (the urge to fight *against* something of which we disapprove)', she wrote to a Swedish member who had just resigned in disillusion.

The one leads to hatred of the sinner rather than hatred of the sin; the other leads to love of the sinner and the possibility of winning him over to our way of thinking. I think this is well illustrated by the attitude of the USA which seems to be activated by hatred of the Russians as well as hatred of their creed. And this leads the USA to adopt methods against

their own people which [are] dangerously like the methods of the dictators themselves.

I am quite sure that we could defeat the threat of violent revolution and communist domination by the *positive* action of helping the under-developed areas of the world to be self-supporting and independent. The communists have been successful in China and South-East Asia because they have liberated the peasants from the grip of the landlords and from destitution and hunger. The price has been too high; but we of the West could have done all this for the hungry peasants, and could have preserved their freedom, if we had been willing to spend money, time and effort in developing the resources of the countries instead of putting so much wealth and effort at the service of the militarists.

Phoebe's tolerant attitude to Communism brought her under much suspicion, during the 1950s and thereafter, and accusations of 'fellow-travelling' from people who really should have known better. Already in 1948 she laid out her opposition to totalitarian regimes when she rebuked a Reading Labour Party colleague who supported the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia:

Totalitarianism is not a bit more acceptable when imposed by communists than it was when imposed by Fascists. Why cannot communists trust the people and not try to impose allegiance by eliminating free discussion? ...Socialism would prevail because it is right and just. It will be destroyed if we take wrong and unjust means to achieve it. In our admiration for the constructive things that Russia has achieved, don't let us blind ourselves to the dangers of seeking our ideals by force. In the end that method will destroy, not only its enemies, but the very ideals for which it is striving, and power becomes the end instead of the means.

In May 1955, with the Cold War getting more scary by the day, Phoebe accepted an invitation from the Communist-dominated British Peace Movement to attend their Conference in Helsinki. 'I had some hesitation, but...I feel that it is vitally important that people of different ideologies should meet and try to understand each other and attempt to dispel suspicion and fear'.

Her expenses were met, not by a fat cheque from Russia, but by more traditional methods such as jumble sales and bring-and-buys. The work was done by the Reading Peace Association, whose secretary, Frida Knight, was to become one of Phoebe's firmest friends. 'It was a great pleasure and stimulus when Mrs Cusden accepted an invitation to go to Helsinki as our delegate', she wrote in the group's Annual Report; 'our expressions 'peaceful co-existence' and 'ban the bomb' were adopted by people who would cer-

tainly not have used them two years ago.'

One reason that Phoebe gave for her Helsinki journey was that she hoped 'to try and make people-to-people contacts behind the Iron Curtain. I should like to establish a link between a town on the other side and Reading, in the same way that I was able to forge a link between Düsseldorf and Reading in 1947'.

No such link was ever forged, but in July 1956 Phoebe's good offices did result in a visit by a group of Russian youngsters to Reading. They were met and entertained by Harold and Phyllis King, stalwarts of the Woodcraft Folk and the Reading-Düsseldorf Association, ever ready to translate Phoebe's generous dreams into practice.

The Helsinki conference bore other fruit for Phoebe: an invitation to visit China. It was only six years since Chairman Mao and the Communist Party had come to power, after decades of civil war and devastation, and there was a sense of hope and shining idealism still that was irresistible to someone like Phoebe.

At the end of the conference, the Chinese delegate invited WILPF members to visit his country and to make up their own minds about their brand of communism. 'They could criticise what they felt needed criticism, suggesting better ways of doing things.'

Phoebe took up the offer, and travelled to China with an assortment of MPs, trade union secretaries and scientists, including Kathleen Lonsdale. She was free to see the aspects of society that she chose: local government, social service organisations, schools and creches.

The status of women, naturally, was of much interest to her. 'Once upon a time a visitor to a Chinese village knocked at the door of a house and when it was opened by a woman enquired if anybody was at home. The woman replied: "Nobody"'. Now there were women at all levels of public life, from the Government to the village school, and Phoebe was amazed at what she saw as 'the rapid and complete change in the general attitude to women... they have 4,000 years of inferiority to overcome, and the speed with which the change has come about is amazing'.

One thing which impressed me very much was the dignity of the people, although they were terribly poor....Before the revolution they had been absolutely down and out and starving. Now they were beginning to come up out of the mire.

She went out of her way to talk to Christian leaders, who praised the new-found 'honesty' that had swept the country since the Revolution:

now they had become honest because there was no longer any need for

them to scramble for the means of livelihood...there are some (Christians among them) who do not accept the materialistic basis of communism but who support the Government because of its beneficent constructive efforts for the welfare of the people...I gained the impression that, because they believe their government to be animated by a genuine desire and determination to secure their welfare, the people give it their willing support and co-operation.

When Phoebe returned to Reading, she was much in demand for talks and discussions for many months. She organised an exchange of children's drawings, which she probably saw as the next best thing to an exchange of people (and perhaps a step towards it), but she did not make many converts.

Phoebe was well aware that her testimony would be considered biased. 'Some of my friends thought that was all very nice of course but we would colour our reports by the fact that we were receiving hospitality', and when she responded angrily to negative reports in the *Observer* she acknowledged that she did so 'at the risk of being dubbed a wool-blinded partisan'.

With hindsight, and knowledge of the 'Cultural Revolution' and all that came with it, it is hard to defend Phoebe from the charge of naivety. 'The message I was asked to bring home was: 'Tell our fellow-Christians in England that we have freedom and that we are happy', she told the Quaker readers of *The Friend*, but she would have heard a different story had she spoken to Chinese Buddhists, or to the people of Tibet, whose country had just been invaded and its monasteries destroyed.

It is true that her views in later years were tempered by events. In 1967, she declared herself to be 'very unhappy about China', and saddened that all she saw had now become 'endangered by (presumably) the lust for power which can only hinder progress towards a less rigid form of government. How fallible is material and political power when divorced from spiritual values!'. Yet Phoebe remained a staunch defender of China to the end of her life, and remained consistent in her belief that China had indeed become 'a true co-operative commonwealth'.

Phoebe's disillusion with the Labour Party was considerably compounded when it formally dropped its opposition to H-Bomb testing early in 1955.

Sir Richard Acland, Labour MP for Gravesend, resigned his seat to stand as an independent Anti H-Bomb Candidate; and Phoebe offered him her active support.

'I am still a member of the Labour Party, but am prepared to be expelled on the issue of the Hydrogen Bomb and disarmament', she told him. 'I am a widow with a very small income but I am prepared to rough it!... I have had a lot of experience of electioneering and am willing to take charge of a com-

mittee room, or to canvass, or to speak at meetings’.

Her offer was gratefully accepted, and for several weeks Phoebe took to the Gravesend hustings. Acland was heavily defeated, but not because of any lack of zeal on Phoebe’s part. ‘Your work was absolutely invaluable’, he told her. ‘We couldn’t possibly have got on without you and I don’t know how you did it in the time’.

In the same year that the people’s party gave its blessing to the Hydrogen Bomb, Phoebe finally joined the Reading Society of Friends.

Her protracted courtship of the Quakers was doubtless fuelled by Labour’s growing *realpolitik*, but there was a more immediate and personal reason for her decision: Albert’s death in January 1953.

‘Last year was the worst year of my whole life and it will be some time before I shall feel strong enough (spiritually) to stand up to...hostility’, she told Mildred Scott Olmsted in February 1954, when things at the WILPF were difficult.

When she finally made the decision, she told Mildred that ‘I feel as though I have come home after being in the wilderness for so many years’. The Quaker testimony of non-violence was of course central to Phoebe’s decision, but the attraction was deeper still.

There is a poster outside the Meeting House now which says ‘Quakers believe that there is something of God in every man. Look for it.’ And it’s true, you know – if you start on the basis that everybody has got something of the divine in them, you must give it scope. The ministry is quite spontaneous and if you are moved to say something you feel that it is something of God which is wanting expressing.

People are people, that’s the most important thing about them, and Phoebe was fond of quoting Hoch’s famous line, ‘*So much good in the worst of us, so much bad in the best of us, it ill becomes the best of us to judge the rest of us*’.

Phoebe became an Elder of Reading Meeting at the age of 88, and her appreciation of her Quaker ‘family’ stayed with her until the end; but even within the Meeting there were those who were a little uncomfortable with what they saw as her ‘fellow-travelling’. Only a few months after she’d joined she found herself having to justify her support for the British Peace Association to Bernard Canter, editor of *The Friend*:

There is, of course, a great deal in what you say about being suspicious of a peace movement linked to the policies of one side – but doesn’t the West act in a somewhat similar way?

Phoebe’s ‘growing internationalism’ was a natural extension of socialism’s Great Cause: now that poverty had diminished at home, it was time to sort

the same problems out elsewhere in the world. 'The war on world poverty, she declared in 1954, is

a very great cause to fight for today...it calls for supreme effort and its challenge is exciting and adventurous, as the sham fight between rival powers that is diverting so great a proportion of the world's wealth from the real war against physical and spiritual destitution.

Britain at the war's end still possessed, at least nominally, the world's largest colonial empire. Labour and the Left had consistently sought to divest the country of its imperial legacy, and the post-war government had conceded independence to the countries of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. After the Suez debacle of 1956, when Britain and France had found themselves powerless to prevent Egypt from nationalising the canal, Macmillan's 'Winds of Change' led to the rapid dismantling of the Empire, in Africa and elsewhere too.

Africa was one of the more unlikely areas of Phoebe's extraordinary expertise. Her interest may have been prompted by her admiration for E D Morel, the socialist who exposed the atrocities of King Leopold in the so-called Congo Free State, but it was greatly fostered by her brother-in-law Victor, British Consul-General at Dakar during the 1930s.

Victor channelled a great deal of information about French West Africa to her, and, although she never actually visited the continent, Phoebe soon became an acknowledged authority on Africa. She was a regular contributor to the *West African Review* in the 1930s, and an article on women's education was, much to her delight, reproduced in the official French Colonial bulletin. Her collation of material on French Colonial health services once earned her a personal note of praise from the Governor-General.

Phoebe, of course, was a fervent supporter of decolonisation. In 1952, she attended a course on African affairs at Reading University, and through the WILPF made strenuous attempts to establish groups within the African countries (particularly South Africa, where she hoped to work with them 'in combatting race antagonism and other trends towards war and international strife of all sorts').

At home, she and Albert worked closely with the International Friendship League's attempts to extend their work to black people, now arriving in Britain in increasing numbers to take on the menial jobs that white people, in the unemployment-free 1950s, refused to do.

Accommodation for black people was hard to find in 1950s Reading. A local government student from the Gold Coast (now Ghana), in Reading at the invitation of the Council, found himself unable to find a place to stay.

At the request of George Darlow, the Town Clerk and an old ally of

