

Peace News

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Tony Smythe CIVIL LIBERTY AND CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

On Monday, October 9, the Guardian printed a letter from Tony Smythe, General Secretary of the National Council for Civil Liberties, concerning the Old Bailey trial of the Greek Embassy demonstrators. Among other things, he wrote that "A battery of archaic and irrelevant laws are being used to curb dissent. The wide discretion of the DPP, the courts, and the police is more often exercised with petulance than with justice. If this state of affairs is allowed to continue, protest, and perhaps progress, will become virtually impossible. I would like to hear from those of your readers who are concerned at these sentences." Here, he discusses the trial and the sentences, and quotes from letters he received in reply to his request.

As the Labour Party conference was passing a resolution against the Greek dictators in defiance of the Executive's advice, jail sentences were being passed at the Old Bailey.

Some people, including most of the delegates, prefer George Brown and others to handle their politics for them. One wonders what the Foreign Secretary will make of the resolution. Other people such as Michael Randle and Terry Chandler, influenced no doubt by the inability of political leaders to link their actions to any clear moral principles, prefer to do it themselves.

As pacifists and democrats, they demonstrated at the Greek Embassy. The Scandinavian governments demonstrated their concern at the Council of Europe. To date the British government has remained silent. Randle and Chandler received 12 and 15 months apiece; Del Foley got 6 months; the British government has not been charged.

We can see the stark contrast between two very different concepts of political action. The conventional way incurs no risks and no penalties.

The reaction of Labour delegates when told of the sentences was fairly typical: they were either sorry but unprepared to act, or said simply, "If people will break into Embassies, what can they expect?" A resolution, even if it were to be ignored by the government, was the beginning and end of their protest.

I do not believe that any of us can avoid responsibility for what took place at the Old Bailey, no more than the 41 demonstrators could avoid responsibility for what has been happening in Greece.

After my depressing experience at the Labour Party conference it was very gratifying and moving to receive a remarkable response to my letter in the *Guardian*. In the first post after publication, the NCCL received 30 letters of support from a wide variety of individuals. The indications are that many more are on the way. I can do no better than quote from some of the letters:

"One of the freedoms we are supposed to cherish is surely the freedom to demonstrate. But nowadays even a poster parade can be accompanied by police restrictions and photographers, that tend to intimidate all but the most inured demonstrator." - London W2.

"The State is interested in maintaining the fiction that we have no political prisoners, that this country is a direct democracy, that it runs on the rule of law etc, and it seems to me desirable to clear all this verbal fog away." - Colchester.

"Legitimate protest by letter writing has become almost pointless in Britain, and the disregard for any form of dissent here is probably greater than in the US or France." - London NW3.

"I feel the time has come to bring pressure to bear on the government and the political par-

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The Greek Embassy demonstration

People who break into embassies, whether a Greek one in London or a British one in Peking, should not expect diplomatic immunity; and although a vote at the Labour Party conference this week shows that the political sympathies of the party in power are broadly aligned with the anti-Patakos demonstrators whom Mr Justice Widgery sentenced on Wednesday, almost any British citizen would prefer such issues to be decided on judicial rather than political criteria. But on this occasion there is serious doubt whether judicial criteria have been properly applied.

It was reasonable of the judge to conclude that the Upper Brook Street demonstration in April was not wholly spontaneous. But in London demonstrations spontaneity is generally a recipe for far greater public disorder than occurred on this occasion. The judge selected Terry Chandler and Michael Randle—two contumacious pacifists and anti-nuclear prison graduates—for exemplary treatment, justifying the sentences he imposed on the conventional police court grounds that they had been "in trouble before." Both defendants' chief trouble was their share in the Committee

of 100's Wethersfield demonstration in 1961, after which they were prosecuted under the Official Secrets Act and sent to prison for 18 months. The case, a classic clash between individual conscience and national expediency, went to the House of Lords. British society would be the poorer if the clash had not been provoked on that issue, and what was done was not so much justice as necessary injustice. If Mr Justice Widgery does not recognise this, it is time he did.

If the sentences are not reduced on appeal to ones more appropriate to the actual offence on this particular occasion, there ought to be more demonstrations. Demonstration is, after all, one of the few quick ways in which people who are no great hand at writing letters can communicate their views to judges and politicians. In a country where even a brief verbal interruption of a church service is apparently an offence, it takes some ingenuity to devise a demonstration that is peaceful, legal, and effective. Indeed, pace Mr Justice Widgery, perhaps only a professional demonstrator can hope to succeed. But when people cease to try, we shall be half way to Patakos's Athens ourselves.

A COUNTRY DIARY

Wallington

BOB OVERY

Last Friday's "Guardian" editorial

Savage sentences in Greek Embassy trial



Terry Chandler: 15 months

If we call the prison sentences handed out at the Old Bailey last week "savage", that is also a reflection on the mentality of the judge. One wonders what primitive emotions passed through the mind of Mr Justice Widgery last Wednesday morning as he sentenced Terry Chandler, Michael Randle and Del Foley to jail for the invasion by more than 50 people on April 28 this year of the Greek Embassy in London.

I phrase my remarks thus personally because I was one of the defendants who was fooled by Judge Widgery last week into believing that, as a liberal man, he had managed to separate the need to be vindictive in this case from the need to deal with persistent civil disobedience. Third in line in the dock for sentence after Terry Chandler had got 15 months and Michael Randle twelve months, I was fully expecting a six months' jail term. I couldn't believe it when I was let off with a fine.

The reason for the disparity in sentences is, on the face of it, not easy to see. In addition to the three men who were jailed, 25 others on the same charge of "unlawful assembly" were given a conditional discharge, and the remaining 11 defen-



Michael Randle: 12 months

dants were fined between £20 and £100.

On Tuesday, the first day of the Old Bailey trial, when he heard what minimal evidence there was, Judge Widgery made it rather clear that he was seeking to judge us not on our political convictions about Greece, or even on our temerity in invading the Greek Embassy, but on our willingness to continue engaging in illegal demonstrations.

In this spirit, he gave a conditional discharge to 23 defendants, including the one person, a student from the London School of Economics, against whom there was clear police evidence of his having acted in a "leadership" capacity by broadcasting over a loudspeaker from the Embassy.

This, then, is what has shocked people inside and outside the court: that the judge, who, on his own terms, is entitled to punish people if they persistently break the law, saw fit on the Wednesday to describe and sentence Terry Chandler and Michael Randle as "leaders" of the Embassy invasion, and Del Foley as a man "with no respect for the law", on the basis simply of their previous convictions.

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