



Quaker Peace
& Social Witness

Journal Letter from London

Holly Wallis, September 2016, Journal Letter No 3

Conscience: Taxes for Peace not War

Dear Friends

During our first week on the job Steve, our manager, sent an email to us Peaceworkers saying “I hope everyone is off to a good start this week – long way to go, but it’ll fly by.” Well, how the time has flown, and how remarkable it is that so much can change, and so much can be squeezed into such a seemingly short amount of time.

My year at Conscience: Taxes for Peace Not War has been perfectly rounded off with the reading of its first Bill in Parliament in 17 years. The Bill, which was tabled as a 10-minute Rule Motion, proposed an extension of the right of conscientious objection to military service into the taxation system. Its introduction to Parliament has been my main focus over the course of this year, and I am pleased to announce that it’s been an all-round successful project for the campaign.

The Bill was read out by Ruth Cadbury MP on the 19th July 2016, a beautifully sunny day. Over the last year we have had to postpone the reading several times, mainly because we were having to quickly learn about the process of submitting a 10-minute Rule Bill – which is frustratingly last minute. These postponements made us well prepared for the fact that, when we were given a date, it would be at short notice. So thankfully it was scheduled for a time when we had finished a busy fortnight of moving office, and was actually during my year at Conscience, something that wasn’t always a certainty!

We were given two weeks’ notice from when the Bill was submitted to when it was being read, not much time to organise press releases, mobilise support for the day, send out communications to members and lobby MPs. It was therefore so heart-warming to see, on the morning of the big day, a group of 30 supporters meet us at Westminster station to support Ruth Cadbury and the campaign. Among the crowd were members from Edinburgh, Wales and the north of England!

Holly Wallis is working for Conscience: Taxes for Peace not War as a UK peacemaker.

Published by Quaker Peace & Social Witness, Friends House, Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ
Telephone: 020 7663 1071; Fax: 020 7663 1001; www.quaker.org.uk/qpsw; email: helenb@quaker.org.uk

We stood in Parliament Square holding the Conscience banner, where Ruth Cadbury came out to meet us and talk to Conscience's supporters. We then all piled into the chamber to watch the bill being read. I had worked with Ruth to produce her speech for the reading, which made it even more exciting to hear it in the chamber. The reading ended with Ruth listing the 10 MPs supporting the Bill at its next reading, which is the full amount of formal support allowed at this stage. The list interestingly included the last minute addition of Kate Green MP, who I had not been aware of in the run up to the Bill. I later found out that the night before Kate Green voted to renew Trident, and wrote on her website,

"Of course, I strongly respect the views of those of you who will disagree with my decision last night, and of those who oppose all war. I'm not a pacifist, but I honour all those who for conscience reasons can never support military engagement in any conflict. That is why I'm proud to have added my name to a bill which will be presented today in parliament by my colleague Ruth Cadbury MP, which provides for HMRC to keep a record of those who self-certify a conscientious objection to public spending for military purposes, and for account to be taken in preparing supply estimates of the amount of such self-certified income tax. Conscientious objection has a long and honourable history in our country, and it is right we recognise that."

Kate Green's statement exemplifies an interesting dynamic of The Peace Tax Campaign – that it is essentially a campaign for an individual freedom and human right. This allows individuals like Kate Green, who may support military activity, to also support the rights of pacifists on a 'I do not agree with what you have to say, but I'll defend to the death your right to say it.' sort of vibe.

Over the past year I have heard from people questioning Conscience's angle to military taxation, who believe that we should be campaigning from within to reduce military spending, rather than campaigning for individual exemption. Some have said that not paying military tax would mean being able to relinquish responsibility for state-sponsored violence, and therefore not influence it for the better. I believe, however, that conscientious objection itself plays a powerfully influential role in working for peace. As in World War I, there were absolutist COs who defended their individual right not to fight and, in remaining steadfast to their beliefs, formed a collective voice which opposed the war.

It's not about 'passivity' or 'exemption', as the Peace Tax Seven's Robin Brookes wrote, *"In becoming a conscientious objector I was not trying to disengage myself from the conflict, in fact, I was engaging with it non-violently"*.

The angle that Conscience takes contributes to the wider movement by creating a voice in the political sphere for individuals who fundamentally object to financing war and the military, an achievement that was highlighted by an MP following the reading of the bill. It also challenges a system that takes our contribution to the military for granted. War and taxes are inextricably linked, and have been for hundreds of years. Income tax itself was introduced to help Britain fight its war against revolutionary France. The Parliament website states, '... the tax came to be accepted as a vital price for winning the war against Napoleon. Indeed, many regarded paying the tax as a patriotic duty.' Taxes are today a means of contributing to the good of your

community, which the majority of us pay in good faith. I believe that Conscience: Taxes for Peace Not War provides a necessary voice that many, while wanting to contribute to the good of society, do not willingly fund the Government's violent activities – and the tax system needs to reflect that in today's world.

All in all, this has been a very exciting and successful year to work for Conscience. The Bill allowed those who identify as conscientious objectors to military tax a voice in parliament, drawing the attention of MPs to this right, and making room for debate. During the course of my placement I have helped re-energise the campaign, gaining it new support, national press coverage (most notably from Giles Fraser in the Guardian, which I'm sure many of you read), and begun to build a modern day register of COs, which I hope will continue to grow long after I leave.

So what's next for me? My current plan is to escape London winter time and teach English in Barcelona until May. I'm not intending on distancing myself from the peace movement, however, and have already begun to make enquiries into things I can get involved in over there. The future of Conscience also looks exciting, with plans afoot for introducing something to The Scottish Parliament, and launching a crowd funder to help send representatives of Conscience to the International Peace Bureau Conference in Berlin, which is also being attended by Conscience and Peace Tax International (CPTI).

A final thank you to everyone for your support of the Peacemaker scheme, it has been an invaluable year for me, and has truly set me off on my Peacemaker path – exactly what it said on the tin!

Holly Wallis