

Britain and the H-bomb [1957]

THIS LETTER TO the *New Statesman* was written at the request of its editor, Kingsley Martin, who wanted Russell to comment on the galley proofs of a forthcoming plea for Britain's unilateral renunciation of nuclear weapons by the English author and social critic J. B. Priestley (1957). Russell's sympathetic response appeared one week after Priestley's famous article, alongside letters from a number of other readers: 54 (9 Nov. 1957): 617 (B&R C57.28). Indeed, the huge weight of mostly supportive editorial correspondence generated by Priestley's moral, financial and political case for unilateralism acted as a stimulus to the formation of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. On 10 December Martin hosted a meeting to determine the feasibility of a new national campaign of opposition to Britain's nuclear defence policy. Priestley and Russell were both present at this gathering of what Canon John Collins called the "midwives of CND" (quoted in Taylor 1988, 20). Overtures were then made to the leaders of the National Council for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons Tests, which was already contemplating a change of focus from testing to disarmament. Russell attended a meeting of sponsors of the new campaign at Collins's home on 16 January 1958, when the NCANWT agreed to be absorbed by CND.

Priestley's article had provided valuable publicity to the founders of CND. Even before publication of the present paper, Martin told Russell that "Britain and the Nuclear Bombs" was being reprinted as a pamphlet. In reply, Russell elaborated upon the views stated in his letter to the *New Statesman*:

As regards the H-bomb question, the sensible course would be an agreement between Russia and America that no one else should have H-bombs, as a first step towards their general abolition. If *we* abandoned H-bombs, we could support this proposal. As for the tests, each test-explosion causes an uncertain number of monsters and deaths through cancer. I do not like my country to be one of those that add to this infamy. (8 Nov. 1957)

Paper 63 was also reprinted with omissions in *Peace News* as "Voice of Sanity", no. 1,116 (15 Nov. 1957): 1, 8, and in full, many years later, in *Yours Faithfully, Bertrand Russell* (2001), pp. 210–11. The copy-text is the typescript carbon of Russell's letter to the editor (RA1 410), dated 26 October 1957 and made from the dictated manuscript in Edith Russell's hand (RA2 750).

SIR,—I have read with great pleasure and almost complete agreement the article by Mr. Priestley on Britain's share in nuclear warfare. It has seemed until recently that Britain might make nuclear weapons but eschew tests; this, however, I understand is technically impossible. I deeply regret Mr. Bevan's capitulation to the Foreign Office, which follows the precedent of Ernest Bevin and Ramsay MacDonald. If the Labour Party is to offer a substantial alternative to the present Government, it will have to find in its ranks some statesman bold enough to ignore the so-called experts who are blinded by tradition to the apprehension of present facts. There are three issues which British foreign policy has to consider: first, shall there continue to be human beings on this planet; second, shall Soviet Communism dominate the world, or may other systems survive here and there; third, can Britain continue to be regarded as in the same rank as Russia and America among Great Powers? The Government and Mr. Bevan agree that the third of these issues is the one which should decide our policy. They do not face the inevitable development that nuclear weapons will, within a very short time, be manufactured by a great many States and that, when this stage has been reached, if any one of such States is governed by a lunatic (as will probably be the case) the rest of the world will have to submit to him or perish. For this development Britain will have a grave responsibility unless the present British policy is reversed.—Yours etc.,

BERTRAND RUSSELL.

26 October, 1957.
Plas Penrhyn.

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350: 3 **article by Mr. Priestley** Priestley 1957 (see Headnote). A founding and executive committee member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, John Boynton Priestley (1894–1984) was also a prolific and versatile writer who published many works of fiction, drama, literary criticism and social commentary. Combining socialist idealism with English patriotism, Priestley had a lengthy record of involvement with progressive organizations and causes and, again not unlike Russell, had gained a still broader measure of public recognition as a broadcaster for the BBC.

350: 6 **Mr. Bevan's capitulation to the Foreign Office** In a celebrated speech to the Labour Party Conference in Brighton on 3 October 1957, Aneurin Bevan (1897–1960), Shadow Foreign Secretary and the dominant figure on the party's left-wing, had denounced as irresponsible a resolution demanding Britain's unilateral repudiation of nuclear weapons. Such a policy, he said in the most quoted phrase of an astonishing address, would "send a British Foreign Secretary ... naked into the conference chamber" (quoted in Campbell 1987, 337). Bevan's political allies were both shocked and dismayed, for he had long been a vocal critic of British nuclear weapons and as recently as March 1955 he had almost been expelled from the party for criticizing its defence policy. The

speech was important in a wider sense: it hastened the formation of an anti-nuclear pressure group by chastening those who might hitherto have anticipated a radical adjustment of defence priorities from an incoming Labour Government. Russell's charge of a "capitulation to the Foreign Office" modified the more scurrilous allegation that Bevan had sacrificed principle because he coveted this senior ministerial portfolio.

350: 7 **precedent of Ernest Bevin** The trade union leader and Labour Party politician Ernest Bevin (1881–1951) had served as Foreign Secretary in both of Clement Attlee's post-war administrations, until being compelled to resign on health grounds in March 1951. The working-class Bevin had previously advocated reform of the Foreign Office and diplomatic corps in order to broaden their predominantly upper-class social base, but he established a close rapport with his senior officials. Although there was little serious disagreement between Bevin and his advisors on matters of policy, it is seldom suggested that Labour's post-war foreign policy was unduly shaped by the permanent bureaucracy. In fact, it has even been claimed that Bevin "played as decisive a part in shaping policy as any Foreign Minister in modern times ..." (Bullock 1983, 102).

350: 7 **and Ramsay MacDonald** James Ramsay MacDonald (1866–1937), Prime Minister of Britain's first Labour Government, served also as Foreign Secretary in the minority administration which he formed in January 1924. In an interview published a few months after Paper 63, Russell remembered MacDonald as "an unmitigated humbug" (1958d). At the time, however, he had praised his stewardship of foreign affairs, especially the "extraordinary tact and adroitness" with which, Russell believed (1924), MacDonald had moderated the anti-German policy of the French. As members of the Union of Democratic Control during the First World War, both men had been resolutely committed to obtaining a peace-by-negotiation.

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The single-leaf typescript carbon (“CT”) measures 203 × 254 mm. and was made on the verso of a covering note (also typed) to Kingsley Martin. The textual notes provide a collation of CT with the dictated manuscript (“MSe”), written and emended in Edith Russell’s hand on both the recto and verso of a single leaf that is foliated 2, and the letter as published in *The New Statesman* (“NS”).

title Britain and the H-bomb NS] *no title*

CT, MSe

350: 3–4 Britain's share in nuclear warfare

NS] "Britain's Share in Nuclear Warfare"

CT, MSe

350: 4–6 It has seemed ... technically impossible. MSe] *inserted from verso to replace incomplete sentence* I thought until recently that Britain might make nuclear weapons but eschew tests; this, however, I understand is technically impossible and I have therefore become persuaded that Britain ought of nuclear weapons completely.

350: 6 Office, NS] Office CT, MSe

350: 16 these CT, NS] these three MSe

350: 19 reached, NS] reached CT, MSe

350: 20–1 (as will probably be the case)

MSe] *inserted*