DILEMMAS FOR THE CANADIAN PEACE MOVEMENT

*In a country where most people want nothing to do with nuclear
weapons, but everything to do with NATO, the peace movement needs
to come up with new strategies in order to remain a political force.*

BY TONY ROGERS

IN 1987, TWO EVENTS OCCURRED in Canada over which one might have expected more public protest. The Mulroney government announced that it would renew the bilateral agreement entered into by the Trudeau Liberal Cabinet with the United States in 1983, permitting the testing of unarmed US Air Force air-launched cruise missiles. It also announced plans to involve Canada in the development of "walls" as envisaged under the US Air Defence Initiative, to block incoming Soviet cruise missiles and bombers. This despite the fact that the Conservatives in 1985 had precluded Canadian government participation in the American Strategic Defence Initiative's research effort to develop an impenetrable "roof" to shield against incoming Soviet ballistic missile warheads.

In stark contrast to the early 1980s, neither of these developments commanded much public attention. The first attracted a handful of protesters; the second occupied one sentence in the government's long-awaited White Paper on defence.

That these programmes should proceed was obvious to their supporters, who felt vindicated that their sober and rational arguments had won out over a well-meaning but emotional peace movement. Canada was, after all, part of the NATO and NORAD alliances; nuclear weapons were not involved in cruise missile testing or the Air Defence Initiative; and these policies were only prudent for the defence of the West, given similar Soviet weapons developments. However, it may be equally possible that the advance of these programmes in spite of mass anti-nuclear demonstrations of the early 1980s signals a need for the Canadian peace movement to re-think the strategies it uses to promote disarmament policies.

SINCE THE PEACE MOVEMENT'S differences with those in government go deep enough to strike at certain basic values, it is not surprising that peace activists have tended to exercise little influence over the policy process through direct representations to politicians and bureaucratic officials. They may be successful in winning the ear of parliamentarians who happen to share their view of the world. Even if they gain access to the Prime Minister and Cabinet, access does not equal influence. Canadian governments have traditionally been wary about adopting measures counter to the political and military interests of the United States, whose values they frequently share, and with whom they are destined to manage a precarious relationship on other bilateral issues.

Instead, the main focus of Canadian peace groups has been to engage the government in a battle to sway public opinion to its cause. The strategy of peace groups in the early 1980s ran as follows: educate and mobilize enough people about the dangers of the arms race, and Canada's participation in it, and governments will have to listen. However, as the cruise and air defence decisions make abundantly clear, peace groups who pursue this route will have to keep constantly in mind that three factors work against them.

First, on issues of war and peace, governments operate with relative autonomy from publics. Historically, state control over military policies has generally gone unchallenged, punctuated only by brief convulsions of public protest. Peace movements in the nuclear age thus represent a challenge not only to particular policies, but also to a particular brand of Western parliamentary democracy permitting governments to unilaterally develop military policies which may increase the risk of nuclear war, without any meaningful consultations with the publics whom they were elected to defend.

Second, the very process through which defence policies are made militates against the success of peace groups. Canadian defence policies tend to be conceived by a closeknit network of American and Canadian defence bureaucrats, and progress in a technical environment, secluded from public scrutiny. Once military policies gain sufficient momentum at the bureaucratic level, they are rarely reversed at the political level without direct intervention by the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Often, by the time peace groups even learn of proposed policies, they may simply have insufficient time to educate themselves, mobilize public opposition and reverse the trend. Canadian-American bilateral discussions on cruise testing started long before these developments were revealed to the public in 1982. Though successful in arousing massive demonstrations, Canadian peace groups were unable to forestall the signing of the cruise missile testing agreement the following spring.

Third, even where governments cannot operate with absolute immunity in fashioning security policies, they nonetheless have various means of deflating, deflecting or rechannelling public opposition. The government can frequently take advantage of public apathy or divisions in public views on defence issues. When the Trudeau Cabinet took the decision in 1982 to allow cruise testing, it did so confident in the knowledge that while Canadians wanted nothing to do with nuclear weapons, they wanted everything to do with NATO. Marrying the issue of air-launched cruise missile testing to a test of Canada's resolve in supporting the NATO Two-Track Decision to deploy ground-launched cruise missiles and Pershing II missiles in Europe was politically attractive, notwithstanding the fact that the cruise missiles Canada was agreeing to test belonged to the US Air Force, and not to NATO; that the US government and not NATO, had requested the testing agreement; and that Pentagon officials confirmed that the Euromissile deployment decisions were in no way conditional upon Canadian cruise testing – a fact made more relevant in light of the government's decision to continue testing the cruise in spite of the recent superpower agreement eliminating the Euromissiles.

WHAT IMPLICATIONS DO THESE findings hold for Canadian peace groups? While understandably the peace movement approaches the