

THE MANCHESTER PEACE MANIFESTO 1936-37

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The pre-eminence of Manchester in the nineteenth century rested upon its solid foundation as a commercial and manufacturing centre and its economic influence was intertwined with its successful prosecution of Free Trade by Cobden, Bright, Villiers and other disciples of the 'Manchester School'. The concept of Free Trade had the capacity to unite pragmatists in the pursuit of profits and idealists in their belief that it would encourage international harmony, unite communities 'and make each equally anxious for the prosperity and happiness of both'.¹ Manchester's influence as a creator of moral opinion was evident by the 1850s when the city had emerged 'as a leading, if not the leading, centre of the British peace movement'²

By the 1930s these attributes, however, had been undermined progressively by the Great War, recession and trade protection. It could be concluded that Manchester's importance as a formulator of moral opinion had declined concomitantly with its economic demise. However, in 1937 there was perhaps the last attempt by the city to assert once again the values of the 'Manchester School'. This involved the now largely forgotten efforts, which captured so much attention at the time, to produce the Manchester Peace Manifesto. It is worth recalling because it provides an interesting illustration of the legacy of Cobden and Bright in the age of Mussolini and Hitler, and was the last major attempt by the city to capitalise on its noble traditions before they were finally destroyed in 1939.

The unlikely inheritor of the mantle of Cobden and Bright was Alderman Joseph Toole, whose Lord Mayoralty from 1936 to 1937 witnessed a remarkable campaign for peace which originated in Manchester but soon acquired a national and eventually international character.

Toole was 'one of the most respected and popular socialists in Manchester and Salford'.³ He was Manchester's third Roman Catholic Lord Mayor and had a remarkable career, being at one time or another a newspaper boy, street cleaner, foundry labourer, trolley boy and actor. In 1935 he described his profession as a 'publicity agent', being employed mainly by the *Manchester Guardian*. His political career had started in the Social Democratic Federation, but it was as a Labour candidate that he entered Manchester City Council in January 1919 for the Openshaw Ward. He represented this ward until 1936 when he transferred to the St. Michael's Ward which he represented until 1940. He rose quickly in the City Labour Party. In 1922 he contested, unsuccessfully, the Everton Division in Liverpool, but was elected to parliament for Salford South in 1923. This was a considerable achievement for Toole had helped to revive an ailing local party and overturn a Conservative majority of 13,000 to win by nearly 3,000. However, he was to lose it in 1924, regain it in 1931 and lose the seat again in 1935. Thereafter Toole, although on the Labour Party's NEC, concentrated on municipal politics, becoming an alderman in March 1935 and Lord Mayor in June 1936.

'Shipload of Friendship'

Toole's tenure of office embodied two Manchester traditions.

The first was the belief in the fraternal efficacy of commerce; the second was denunciation of war - although, as will be discussed, Toole was not a pacifist. The former demonstrated the unorthodox approach to public affairs which he was to apply to the latter. In November 1936 Toole proposed a novel initiative to deal with the sharp deterioration in Anglo-Irish relations arising out of the 'trade war'. He would charter a boat, fill it with local civic and commercial dignitaries, and sail to Dublin to discuss matters directly with Dublin Corporation and the Irish government. Toole's 'shipload of friendship' plan aroused considerable interest and is worth recalling, briefly, because his zeal for this project was soon to be transferred to the Manchester Peace Manifesto. Toole's proposals received instant support from the Ship Canal Company, who offered a vessel, and from the Chamber of Commerce and the Royal Exchange. Toole received a number of enquiries from a number of neighbouring authorities who wanted to be included in the delegation. Finally, he called a meeting of 28 Lord Mayors and proposed that every Lord Mayor in Lancashire, which he considered to be badly effected by the 'trade war', should take part in the trip.

Although seasoned observers felt Toole's plan to be 'highly significant', it did, in the event, collapse on the realities of politics. Dublin Chamber of Commerce resented not being consulted by either of the two Lord Mayors and, in the fact of practical difficulties, some possibly from Whitehall, Toole extricated himself from his proposal by announcing that 'time and circumstances in a year crowded for both cities with many important events have rendered my proposal impossible for fulfilment'.⁴ It could be argued that the initiative indicated a peculiar naivety on Toole's behalf, engendered perhaps by his own Irish background. However, by 1936 Toole was an



Joe Toole

Haycock started the Norman Angell League, an organisation based upon the famous book *The Great Illusion*, and together we worked day in and day out doing voluntary propaganda in every town in Lancashire. We had many distinguished men and women supporters. Sir Norman Angell, as he now is, was at the head of our thinking department. Amongst others I worked with were B. N. Langdon Davies, the Cambridge coach, John Hilton, now Professor of Economics at Cambridge and famous for his wireless debates and talks on social questions, Professor Graham of Dalton Hall, and many in the world of commerce like Charles Renolds of Hans Renold Ltd., Stubbs of the Openshaw engineering firm, Harry Brown, and also Ernest Elcock, who has since become a great figure in the architectural world. Elcock's firm have erected some of the best buildings in Britain and abroad. The wonderful Davyhulme Hospital near Manchester, the *Daily Telegraph* offices in Fleet Street and the splendid Grand Stand on the Epsom Racecourse are all entirely or partly his handiwork. We were a happy and, if I may say so, talented crowd, and we really believed that if only the message were properly spread we could prevent war.

Haycock and myself had planned a trip to Germany to meet the people there who shared our views about wars. We were to leave Central Station, Manchester, on the first Saturday in August 1914. When we arrived at the station to take the train, notices were posted informing all and sundry that all trains

for the Continent had been cancelled. "Then it's a war," said we, "and our job is to stop it." That evening we received a telegram from Angell to go to London at once to address a mass meeting in Hyde Park. Off we went in the sure and certain faith possessed by all enthusiasts that all that was needed to prevent a European war was a couple of speeches from us. On the Sunday afternoon, speaking from a lorry in Hyde Park, we opened a meeting at three o'clock. We had no chairman—there was not sufficient time for such preliminaries. Keir Hardie was addressing a large gathering in Trafalgar Square at the same time, but in spite of this we must have gathered nearly twenty thousand people around our platform. We spoke in turn for over six hours. Not only were we cheered to the echo, but when we closed down at dusk we were carried shoulder high by men of all nationalities, English, German, French and Italian. War was declared at midnight on Monday, August 4th, 1914. The following Sunday we took up the same pitch in Hyde Park before practically the same crowd. We had to run for our very lives. The famous track-runners Postle and Growcott never ran so fast as we did on that occasion. It was a lesson for me in the psychology of the mob, one which I shall never forget.

"The Great Illusion" had become a great disillusionment for me.

Time works wonders, for Angell has just been awarded the Nobel prize for his work in the cause of World Peace, twenty years after we helped him in propaganda work.

Extract from Joseph Toole's 'Fighting Through Life' recalling his peace efforts in 1914.

experienced politician and the episode demonstrates rather his pragmatic inclination to work with any person to achieve a given end. Throughout the 1920s he had found party divisions on the City Council irksome, and he had always maintained good relations with Lord Derby, the leader of Lancashire Conservatism. He was also widely travelled, having visited the United States which he found 'the greatest mass of contradictions in the world' and Russia from which he felt Britain had nothing to learn.

While Toole's 'shipload of friendship' plan was unfolding it attracted the attention of Sir Norman Angell, the journalist Wickham Steed and the historian Philip Guedella. Angell was the author of the best-selling book *The Great Illusion*, published in 1910. Angell had argued that the financial and economic interdependence of nations would make even the victor nation in a war suffer equally with the defeated. The book became a

cult, with Norman Angell Leagues being formed in all the major cities. The Manchester branch which Toole joined before the Great War, was formed by Angell's colleague, Leonard Behrens. Steed, a former editor of *The Times*, was a leading critic of the government's policy of reprisals in Ireland in 1920. Although replaced by Geoffrey Dawson, Steed still remained an influential figure in political life. Guedella was an editor of the voluminous Gladstone correspondence and represented a link with the Victorian internationalism of Cobden and Bright.

These men saw in Toole's proposals the blueprint for a peace campaign based on national and international municipal cooperation.

Toole, recalling his enthusiastic work 'doing voluntary propaganda in every town in Lancashire' for the Norman Angell League, had to admit that, even before 1914, the 'Great



Joseph Toole, Lord Mayor 1936-7.

Illusion' 'had become a great disillusion for me'.⁵ When overtures were made to him by Angell and his colleagues in November 1936 Toole was receptive. He decided to 'utilise all the spare time a Lord Mayor has to works of peace, yielding nothing to threats of war'.⁶

Manchester Manifesto

At the end of January 1937 Toole invited the editors of the principal local newspapers to see how best a lead could be given 'to the ordinary plain people of other countries in eradicating the idea that war was inevitable'. The decision was taken to hold a mass meeting at the Free Trade Hall on the 14 February when Manchester would present 'a manifesto to the world' which Toole asserted 'will have such a profound effect on public thought that one shall be able to turn round to Europe and say 'What do you think about this? This is Manchester's view and you must heed it'.⁷ The speakers would include Angell and Wickham Steed.

Peace meetings were not, of course, new in Manchester. At a rally of the League of Nations Union in the Free Trade Hall in November 1936 for example, Viscount Cecil told a packed audience that '...the purpose of what is called the International Peace Campaign ... is to get a declaration from all free peoples of the world in favour of peace throughout the League of Nations'.⁸ However, what made Toole's campaign unique was his desire to make it a genuinely populist movement. The League of Nations put its strength behind Toole's campaign and, although based in the first instance in Manchester, the League, on Toole's behalf sent out 2,000 letters to local peace organisations and societies and other bodies which might support the campaign. These included the Humane Education Society, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Trades Councils, Women's Guilds, Stockport Peace Council, Preston Peace Council, Manchester and District Youth Peace Council, the Workers' Educational Association and the Manchester University Union.

At the beginning of February 1937 the Manchester Peace Manifesto was drafted. It was to represent 'citizens of all parties, together with representatives of all the Churches, and of the academic, scientific and women's worlds in Manchester who desire to show this will for peace and for brotherly cooperation with other peoples'.

The Manifesto was likely to attract wide support because it avoided specific proposals. Conservatives could support it after Baldwin's declaration that the League of Nations formed 'the keystone of the government's foreign policy': the Labour Party policy statement *For Socialism and Peace* in 1935 had spoken of a 'Peace Crusade' which also embraced collective security. The sentiments of the Manchester Manifesto embodied classical Liberal traditions which would ensure the support of that party. In contrast, the Manchester Communist Party was perhaps less enthusiastic, preferring instead to campaign for a United Front against Fascism. They were no doubt further alienated by Toole's scathing observation that British Communists, in their admiration for Russia and their hostility to the British Labour Party, were blundering 'along their lonely lane of egotism'.⁹

In a broader context the time was propitious for Toole's campaign. In February 1933 the Oxford Union passed the famous resolution that 'this House will in no circumstances fight for its King and Country'. In October 1934 Canon Dick Sheppard helped to launch the Peace Pledge Union which, by 1936, had 100,000 members. The results of a Peace Ballot organised in 1935 by an ad hoc body, the national Declaration Committee, revealed a continuing support for the League of Nations and disarmament but also a belief in the use of military measures in the last resort via collective security. This stance was personally congenial to Toole who, despite his vigorous peace campaigning before the First World War, had enlisted promptly in the Air Force in 1914 when further peace campaigning seemed futile. Finally, there was already an unorthodox peace campaign being undertaken by the former Labour leader, George Lansbury, who had resigned on the issue of collective security. Throughout 1936 and 1937 he had been conducting gruelling trips to European heads of state to discuss the maintenance of peace.

Toole's campaign, conversely, was directed more at the common person. It would be based in the first instance in Manchester and involve the signing of a petition by local people. As in the past, Manchester would then appeal to the rest of the country to support it. Toole hoped to use the framework of municipal politics to advance this by building on Labour's success which, since 1934, had resulted in the party controlling 15 of the metropolitan boroughs, 21 county boroughs and 18 non-county boroughs. The Manchester Manifesto upheld the belief that only the League of Nations Covenant and the Kellogg Pact stood between war and peace:

*Europe draws near the brink of ruin. In friendship and in goodwill we call our peoples to save themselves and her. We call the peoples to join hands above the divisions of race or class or creed. With its whole strength the British people is ready to foster peace in friendship with all. Who will assess its appeal?*¹⁰

The Manifesto went on to point to the civil strife 'envenomed from without' in Spain, the rearmament throughout Europe, the lack of leadership and the potential of machines for good as well as evil.

In the event Angell was unable to attend the inaugural meeting Toole had called in the Free Trade Hall. Before an audience of 3,000 Toole, in his opening address, warned: 'If somebody does not say something it is goodbye to civilisation as we know it'. Steed echoed the theme, pointing out that the advance of science and the progressive reduction of distance in terms of space and time 'has not been achieved so that we may be nearer to each other and drop bombs on each other'.¹¹

Although Toole had to appeal to a disparate audience of pacifists and supporters of collective security, he made no

attempt to conceal his own position. He continued to urge people to join the evolving Air Raid Precautions service (ARP) as 'a sensible and solemn duty for any man'.¹² In a speech to members of the Manchester Regiment in November 1936 he insisted that the country 'must be prepared to defend the liberty it possesses'; but, as he indicated a week later to the 42nd East Lancashire Division of the Territorial Army: 'I do not believe in conscription ... the best military system is the voluntary one'. Rearmament was something which had to be supported. 'The country would not forgive a refusal to support adequate armed forces at a time when Socialists were demanding resistance to dictatorship and intervention in Europe'.¹³ Toole's campaign, however, focused on the sentiments of the Manifesto and not on the specifically contentious issues of conscription, the ARP and collective security. To have done otherwise would have led to inevitable divisions.

Toole's campaign was to proceed from strength to strength. After the Free Trade Hall meeting on the 14 February, in response to invitations, Toole was speaking in Leeds, Liverpool, Sheffield and, at the end of March, London, Birmingham, Cardiff and Glasgow. In addition to the 2,000 people who signed the Manifesto in the Free Trade Hall, Toole reported that many more signatures had been obtained by canvassing in Manchester and many private firms had requested copies of the Manifesto for their staff to sign. There is no accurate record of the final number of people who signed the Manifesto. Steed indicated to Manchester University students in February 1937 that the copies of the Manifesto which would be sent to Mussolini and Hitler would have 1,400 signature, but in view of its circulation, it is likely the figure was much more.

Toole announced that he would call another meeting in Manchester on the 6 March 1937 at which the principal speaker would be P.J. Noel-Baker M.P. Invitations would be sent to 1,000 organisations. The publicity produced by the campaign resulted in an invitation being extended to Toole by the President of the Municipal Council of Paris and the Mayor of Lyons on behalf of the French Committee of European Cooperation to represent Britain at the Briand Commemoration ceremony in Paris. At the end of May 1937 Toole informed a distinguished audience at the Sorbonne that 'we stand with one firm purpose to outlaw the war method as a means of settling international differences'. His speech was said to have made 'a deep impression',¹⁴ but did not evidently merit attention hostile or otherwise in the London press. Within a few days of his French visit Toole was addressing a meeting organised by Preston Peace Council at the end of a week's activities during which 'a mile of pennies' had been laid in Market Square in aid of the peace movement fund.

It is impossible to state with precision the influence of the Manchester Peace Manifesto upon the city's attitude to war. It may be significant that throughout the Peace Manifesto campaign recruitment to the ARP services in Manchester remained one of the lowest in the region. Peace might have been thought to offer an 'intellectual' appeal to middle-class groups who formed the backbone of Toole's support, but these groups seemed the most ready to enrol in the ARP services. As Steed put it: 'We shall stand like a rock against any country which on any pretext whatever proposes to revert to mass butchery to attain its ends'.¹⁵

Although the *Manchester City News* remarked in March 1937 that 'Peace seems to be Manchester's 'best-seller' at the moment, every meeting on the subject being packed to the doors',¹⁶ working-class attitudes to Toole's campaign were evidently mixed. There is no indication that rearmament in an economically depressed region was unpopular. Conservative



Mrs. Joseph Toole, Lady Mayoress, 1936-7.

MPs like A.E. Radford (Rusholme), Peter Eckersley (Exchange) and Sir Joseph Naill (Hulme) were consistent 're-armers' whose popularity did not suffer in the 1935 general election. Trade unionists in the city had participated in a Joint Demonstration for Peace in July 1936; in August Manchester Trades Council urged all workers to decline to participate in the ARP services. Until the outbreak of war the Trades Council adopted the orthodox Labour line of supporting collective action against aggression via collective security through the League of Nations.

Throughout 1937 and 1938 trade unionists in the city were resisting wage reductions and the new Unemployment Assistance Board regulations. The prospect of increased employment at Metropolitan Vickers in Trafford Park, the Avro works and the vast Mather and Platt engineering works at Newton Heath and Fairy Aviation's Heaton Chapel works were factors which the Trades Council could not ignore.

In an aside directed perhaps at Toole's campaign, the Trades Council noted in 1938:

*Spectacular demonstrations may serve a useful purpose for playing upon the emotions of the people, but you cannot build a real solid movement upon such methods.*¹⁷

This was telling criticism. The Peace Manifesto, in Toole's phrase, was 'speaking to the people over the heads of the statesmen', but to its critics this gave the movement an artificiality. To discuss peace in a vacuum divorced from politics and diplomacy seemed to damn it as an impractical vision. 'What the Foreign Secretary has failed to do with the stiff and highly groaning machinery of diplomatic relationship ... Joe will do with a hearty entrance, a good meal and the after dinner cherrio'.¹⁸ This was, to put it mildly, a somewhat simplistic view of foreign affairs.

Certainly the peace movement did have positive proposals for disarmament, the abolition of weapons and the international control of aviation. Toole's movement campaigned on a deliberately vague sentiment to preserve its broad character. This suggested that it lacked a grasp of diplomatic realities and was therefore a major weakness. As Toole's daughter, Millie, later admitted: 'Peace is a political issue, and simple questions

and plain statements from plain people are like straw when the wind of war starts blowing'.¹⁹

Copies of the Manchester Peace Manifesto had been sent to the Prime Minister, Baldwin, and to Mussolini and Hitler, but, as its critics pointed out, it was unlikely that it would ever reach the ears of ordinary Germans and Italians - the 'plain people' to whom Toole was anxious to reach. The Manchester Peace Manifesto was in fact ill-named. It was rather a laudable expression of sentiment and not a declaration of policy. Once it had been canvassed and presented there was very little further mileage in this form of campaigning. There is no evidence that other cities were emulating the Manchester Manifesto to any significant degree. Unfortunately international events, the Japanese invasion of China in 1937 and the German annexation of Austria in 1938, provided grim illustrations that the force of argument was being displaced by the argument of force.

Ironically Toole's involvement in the Peace Manifesto was to be his last major public venture in Manchester. When his Lord Mayoralty ended in 1937 his political fortunes declined and never recovered. He lost his seat on Labour's NEC and the expectation that he would soon take up a council committee chairmanship - a position he had never in fact held - was not realised. Toole's severe criticism of the committee system in the 1920s was evidently not forgotten. Moreover, his popularity within the labour movement was often imperilled by his idiosyncratic style of politics, his bipartisanship and his denunciation of Communism.

His essay into foreign affairs may well have alienated him from a Labour leadership which, it has been observed, pursued 'an internationalism defined and expressed through a small number of leaders; and certainly not an internationalism that could be used to mobilise and politicise the rank and file'.²⁰

Strangely Toole, although he had once defined Fascism and unemployment as the greatest evils of his time, does not seem to have played a leading role in the Aid for Spain movement in the North West which developed throughout 1937. He was merely one of the many patrons of the 'Foodships' which were sent from Manchester and Lancashire, but played no active

role locally. It was rather his Labour colleagues William Johnson and Harry Frankland who chaired meetings and organised events. Nor did Toole participate on the National Joint Council for Spanish Relief which contained his former Manchester Manifesto colleague, P.J. Noel-Baker.²¹

His aspiration to return to parliament received a set-back when Salford South Labour Party indicated in March 1938 that they already had a prospective candidate. He was adopted eventually for Bury, but was to relinquish his candidature before the outbreak of war, possibly for financial reasons. His income as a publicity agent for the *Manchester Guardian* declined sharply and, once again, as in his youth, he had to follow a series of precarious ill-paid jobs. In 1940 he was employed by the Ministry of Information as a speaker, touring the industrial areas speaking to workers. He was a great admirer of Churchill, but his connection with the Ministry ended in an acrimonious dispute over his views on the punishment of war criminals and his expenses. Financial exigencies drove him back to the stage and he appeared at the Blackpool Opera House and the Hackney Empire, relating the humorous events of his life, in a short-lived touring show.

He still retained his interest in Manchester and toured its Rest Centres during the Blitz. Despite a serious illness in 1942, Toole took the surprising decision in January 1944 to contest the Sipton by-election as an independent Labour candidate. It was perhaps a manifestation of his frustration with a party which seemed to have no place for him. In a seventy per cent poll Toole lost his deposit and was expelled temporarily from the Labour Party.²²

In a final attempt to regain solvency, and his health, Toole had moved to Blackpool in 1945 to enter the hotel business. However, in June of that year he died aged 58. He had been a member of Manchester City Council for 21 years. His death, as the *Manchester Evening News* remarked, removed 'one of the most engaging personalities in Manchester public life during the last 30 years'.²³ His daughter's observation, however, may be a more appropriate epitaph. The people 'had loved him, and loathed him. But they had never ignored him, for he was news'.²⁴

NOTES

1. W.D. Grampp, *The Manchester School of Economics*, London, 1960, p. 100.
2. D. Nicholls, 'The Manchester Peace Conference of 1853', *Manchester Region History Review*, V:i Spring/Summer 1991 pp. 11-21.
3. *Manchester Evening Chronicle*, 7 November 1935.
4. *Manchester Evening Chronicle*, 14 September 1937; *The Times*, 24 September 1937.
5. J. Toole, *Fighting Through Life*, London, 1935, p. 121.
6. J. Toole, *My Year as Lord Mayor of Manchester*, Manchester, 1937.
7. *News Chronicle*, 30 January 1937. Note the similarity between this and Manchester's decision to erect Nuclear Free Zones in 1983. 'We are posing the question and people have to respond in a positive way - we are forcing them to make their own decision'. Councillor Peter Brown cited in *Manchester Evening News*, 6 May 1983.
8. *Daily Dispatch*, 12 November 1936.
9. Toole, *Fighting Through Life*, p. 197.
10. *Manchester Guardian*, 9 February 1937.
11. *Daily Herald*, 15 February 1937.
12. E. Little, 'Manchester City Council and the Development of Air Raid precautions 1935-1939', *Manchester Region History Review*, Spring/Summer 1988.
13. *Manchester Evening News*, 30 November 1936; *Daily Dispatch*, 15 February 1937.
14. *Daily Sketch*, 31 May 1937; *Municipal Journal*, June 1937.
15. *Daily Herald*, 15 February 1937.
16. *Manchester City News*, 25 March 1937.
17. *Manchester and Salford Trades Council Report*, 1938, p. 9.
18. *The Harvest*, January 1937.
19. M. Toole, *Our Old Man: A Biographical Portrait of Joseph Toole*, London, 1948, p. 160.
20. T. Buchanan, 'Britain's Popular Front? Aid Spain and the British Labour Movement', *History Workshop*, Issue 31, Spring 1991.
21. *Aid Spain Material*, Working Class Movement Library, Salford.
22. *Times*, 10 January 1944. The Commonwealth Party candidate, Hugh Lawson won.
23. *Manchester Evening News*, 5 June 1945.
24. M. Toole, *Our Old Man*, p. 203.