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Speech by Joan Ruddock at the CND Rally on 12 June 1983

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Summary:

This speech by Joan Ruddock, Chairperson of CND, was given three days after the Conservatives won an increased majority in the 1983 general election. She responds to the election results and what lessons can be drawn from this, before explaining how CND's work will continue.

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SPEECH BY JOAN RUDDOCK AT CND RALLY ON JUNE 12
JOAN RUDDOCK IS CHAIRPERSON OF CND

Today's rally is a declaration. A declaration to the new Government, to the people of Britain, and to the peoples of the world. It is this - you do not stop a popular mass movement by announcing the result of a General Election!

I want to speak firstly about that election because there are many who would link our fate to it. I do not. And I would like to give you my reasons. The campaign was, in style, a presidential one, in which the personalities of party leaders counted more than the issues. Our issue - nuclear disarmament - could not be isolated and suffered along with the rest. While our aim of making nuclear weapons a major focus of the election was achieved, our opponenets turned it to their own advantage, shifting the grounds of the debate and ensuring that the critical questions of Cruise, Trident and Britain's unilateral escalation of nuclear weapons passed almost unnoticed.

No mandate for Cruise and Trident deployment has been given, no mandate for a programme of massive unilateral escalation in nuclear weapons by Britain; no mandate for UK support for Ronald Reagan's fanatical pursuit for nuclear superiority. Mrs. Thatcher called Polaris her weapon of last resort - what she failed to identify were her weapons of first resort!

It is now our most urgent task to inform people that Britain, through NATO, has a policy of first use of nuclear weapons. Unannounced outside the ranks of the military, Britain has recently doubled the number of nuclear artillery available to the British army of the Rhine, and plans exist for further substantial increases.

And what of the rumours surrounding the Williamsburg summit? Most people thought the Prime Minister had simply gone to have her photograph taken with Ronald Reagan, but interestingly enough the Americans haven't denied that the European leaders asked for neutron warheads for their battlefield artillery . These would be Britain's weapons of first resort, backed up by the devastating power of Cruise and Tornado.

This conference hall, last Sunday, witnessed the fear, hostility and even hatred of the Russian people which had been engendered in order to maintain support for nuclear weapons. Is that its only purpose? We have certainly seen no gain for the peoples of Britain or of the Soviet Union. We have seen no gain in our security, still less in theirs. We have seen no gain in disarmament negotiations - the stated aim of every British government. Why doesn't one eminent journalist (for it only they who may speak with her) ask the Prime Minister where it will all end? Just how many nuclear warheads would she like Britain to acquire and how do they improve our defences? But we have time to pursue these matters further.

For me the election period offered a rare opportunity to meet a large number of you and to see your campaigning activities at first hand. It was a very rewarding experience. We went all over Britain. Annajoy and I went to Cardiff and found the whole city centre covered in CND posters. The rally was huge and we shared the platform with a large number of candidates who had promised not to attack each other - and nearly succeeded!

In Scotland I attended a hillside picnic, so wet that we all had to stand up! We were guarded by 2 policemen, symbolically recognising the threat of the local group to the American nuclear submarine lurking below us in the Holy Loch. At Rosyth I visited the newest - and very picturesque - peacecamp, and heard of the Rolls Royce factory where workers had given notice that they did not wish to receive work for Trident.

Back in England, in the West Country, no less, I was verbally savaged by 'Women For Defence', arrogantly asserting their right to see us all 'better dead than red'.

After the meeting a woman came to sympathise - and I shrugged it off as the rough and rumble of campaigning. She, however, was depressed - 'It's my children they want to kill', she said. We could have been despondent, yet within a minute a young male nurse had come to tell me that he and others had put their own money into purchasing a vehicle which would act as a travelling office for the local medical campaign against nuclear weapons. That is typical of where the peace movement stands today. The only question is how best to build on our own success.

We have to look carefully at the different elements of our campaign and use our national council meetings in July and October to decide any changes in tactics between now and the December conference.

We can build non violent direct action. The blockades at Burghfield, Greenham and Upper Heyford have demonstrated that thousands are prepared to put themselves at risk, in order to draw attention to the weapons of mass destruction in our midst. These actions have caused disruption and inconvenience and introduced an element of uncertainty to the secure and secret world of the Ministry of Defence. Such actions must continue, but we will have to decide the best ways of furthering the campaign through NVDA in the future. We have always known, that if the political process failed to respond to majority opposition on Cruise we could not physically stop their deployment, but that does not limit our scope for NVDA. I'm sure the Greenham women have a surprise or two in store! We also have many other forms of NVDA available to us. People are beginning to take up the boycotts, the blackings, and the phone-ins. No doubt other equally imaginative ideas will be developed.

And then there is the electoral process and parliamentary politics. Many of us may feel a little jaundiced on that score today, but it would be a grave mistake, in my view, if we failed to relate our campaign to the political process. The new parliament contains many members committed to CND and many others who reject both Cruise and Trident or Trident alone. There is a great deal of work to be done in that area and the information and experience gained by us all at the election can be put to good use.

There is an immense amount of work to do, but this movement has shown that it has, not only immense energy, but imagination too. We are going to need both. The struggle ahead may look daunting but we must not lose our nerve. Four years ago, CND consisted of a few thousand members and supporters, today we are a mass movement of quarter of a million people. We are linked in friendship and solidarity with many similar movements here and abroad. Yet, we would not be human if doubt never entered our minds. At a public meeting a week ago a man asked me to give him an assurance that CND would not go into a decline. My reply was this. I cannot give you that assurance, but you can give it for yourself. This campaign will always be the sum total of its grassroots activities.

And what of unilateralism? There are some who would counsel us to pursue more limited aims. That would only lead to a charge of hypocrisy - our case rests on our declaration that we cannot be defended with nuclear weapons. Having said that, we will always need to adopt strategies for particular campaigns, as indeed we have done in making Cruise and Trident our priorities. We will also need to tackle the false charge of defencelessness, so actively promoted by those who oppose us and keenly felt by those who would support us. We have ready allies, in the Alternative Defence Commission and amongst the ex-military men who themselves now fear the drift to nuclear war.

We can be confident that the broad base of the peace movement both in Britain and abroad can be extended. Experience tells us that once removed from the crude bravado of the hustings, ordinary people are thoughtful and concerned about the possibility of nuclear war. CND has already been tested many times. Our opponents have sought to confine us to a political ghetto and have descended into the gutter to do it. They will not succeed.

Mrs. Thatcher won the election with a resolute approach. We will match her resolution! But we will temper it with compassion. Compassion for those whose only means of livelihood is making nuclear weapons, compassion for the people of the third world, whom we starve while we prepare for their ultimate destruction; and above all, compassion for our planet, its plant and animal life and its peoples of different creeds, colours and ideologies.

They have fought us with lies, we will fight them with the truth. This is a struggle from which we will not turn aside.