

Creating a better world: some lessons for the next 25 years

SGR's 25th anniversary conference; 28 October 2017; The Gallery, Farringdon, London
Summary by Martin Bassant and Stuart Parkinson

Over 60 people gathered for SGR's silver anniversary conference, which focused on how rapid progress had been achieved in the past on key security and environmental problems and how lessons from these examples could be used to help deal with current threats.

As participants gathered before formal proceedings began, members old and new took the opportunity to reflect on SGR's 25 years – helped by a montage of photos from the organisation's archives. As usual, participants came from a range of technical and campaigning backgrounds, and it was good to see younger members involved in proceedings.

Executive Director Stuart Parkinson opened the conference by remarking on both the contrasts and the similarities between the world today and the world in 1992, when SGR was formed. Wars in the Middle East and inadequate action on climate change are still key issues – although there had been important progress in some of these areas.

The potential for rapid transition

Andrew Simms, of the think-tank, the New Weather Institute, kicked off proceedings with an interesting presentation looking at situations where society had rapidly and successfully adapted in the face of major threats. He drew on diverse examples from World War II to the post-Cold War period, including the global financial crisis of 2007-8 and even the ash cloud from an Icelandic volcano which overnight grounded air travel across Europe in 2010. He used a range of interesting quotes to get across key points, the most memorable of which was, "History teaches us nothing, only punishes [us] for not learning its lessons."

Andrew argued that rapid change to a low carbon and low consumption society is "not easy but demonstrably possible" and gave several examples, especially from within the UK during WWII. Not only had British society adapted at speed to much lower consumption of some key commodities, there had also been unexpected benefits, such as improvements in nutrition and health. He also argued that quantitative easing – on a comparable or smaller scale than that used to bail out the banks in 2007-8 – could be used to transform our energy system at a much faster rate

than we are currently doing. This would be more in line with the urgency demanded by the scale of the climate change threat.

During the discussion, Andrew pointed out that full consensus on an issue is not necessarily a precondition in order for major cultural change to happen. A key recent example was the rapid acceptance of gay marriage in the UK and elsewhere.

Andrew's presentation is based on a report he authored – *How did we do that?* – which can be downloaded from: <http://www.newweather.org/2017/04/24/new-study-how-did-we-do-that-the-possibility-of-rapid-transition/>



Andrew Simms speaking on rapid transition

Transforming the security agenda

Philip Webber, SGR's Chair, then gave us a history lesson on the security agenda. He focused on transitions related to nuclear weapons – sometimes rapid – during and after the Cold War. He discussed the nuclear arms control treaties negotiated in the decade following the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. He looked at the rapid changes in the late 1980s, following the appointment of Mikhail Gorbachev as President of Soviet Russia, especially the negotiation of very large cuts in the numbers of Russian and US nuclear weapons. He also covered the very recent negotiations on the new Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). Phil interspersed these with discussion of UK civil defence – government emergency preparations in the event of nuclear attack – looking at how these transformed in response to major criticism.

Particularly interesting were the stories Phil told about his own experiences working in civil defence with the Greater London Council and as an emergency planning officer for South Yorkshire in the 1980s. He spoke about the considerable mismatch between government advice in pamphlets like 'Protect and Survive' and the warnings that he and others were able to give based on robust scientific information. He highlighted some of the key books and films that were helpful in getting the message across to the public – not least *London After the Bomb* (which he co-authored) and other reports from Scientists Against Nuclear Arms.

When discussing the campaign for the TPNW, he highlighted the importance of broadly-based grassroots activity connected to key international decision-makers, robust scientific information on the nature of the threats, and use of few celebrities! The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) combined these different aspects very effectively which is why it was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its leading role in the TPNW. Phil also highlighted SGR's role in ICAN, producing well-researched briefings on the threat from UK nuclear weapons which were distributed at the preparatory intergovernmental meetings as well as via the web.

Phil's presentation can be downloaded from the SGR website at: <http://www.sgr.org.uk/resources/transforming-security-agenda>

Update on peacemaker project

Next, Philip Wood, SGR's 'peacemaker' (a research post funded by Quaker Peace and Social Witness), gave a presentation on his preliminary findings on the financial links between engineering and scientific organisations in the UK and the arms and fossil fuel



industries. He covered areas such as investments, funding for school education projects, and conference sponsorship. The links were, in some cases, extensive. A report on this work will be published later in 2018.

SGR's Annual General Meeting

After a refreshments break, SGR's AGM was held, chaired by Philip Webber. Stuart Parkinson summarised the organisation's work over the previous financial year – not least our involvement in the ICAN this year. Alasdair Beal then covered SGR's finances. Six members of the National Co-ordinating Committee (NCC) were then re-elected:

Chair: Philip Webber
Vice-chair: Jan Maskell
Treasurer: Alasdair Beal
Secretary: Martin Bassant

Committee Members: David Hookes, Paul Marchant

Many people were thanked for their valuable contributions over this and previous years, not least Philip Webber for being Chair for all but two of SGR's 25

years, and Vanessa Moss for managing the SGR office and compiling the accounts. Thanks were also expressed for the work of previous committee members, staff, patrons and numerous volunteers, all of which has helped make SGR the organisation it is today.

SGR members' forum

SGR Vice-chair Jan Maskell then led a members' forum which broke into small groups to discuss three questions:

- which SGR activities have been the most successful?
- what should SGR's priorities be during the next five years?
- what issues would be best for SGR working groups to cover?

The answers from the groups were quite diverse. Successful past activities included work on nuclear weapons, Science4Society Week, military science, and ethical careers. On future priorities, some argued for 'more of the same' while others argued for a greater emphasis on (for example) climate change or biodiversity. There were numerous suggestions for working group topics including economics for



© Philip Wood

Members' forum discussions

sustainability, military involvement at universities, biodiversity, artificial intelligence, and debunking nuclear deterrence. Some members volunteered to be involved in such groups. SGR's staff and NCC will be contacting members about these over the next few months.

Stuart Parkinson closed the conference by thanking all those attending on being part of an inspiring day.

Material from the conference can be downloaded from: <http://www.sgr.org.uk/events/creating-better-world>

Health through peace

Medact/ IPPNW conference; 4-6 September 2017; York University

Summary by Stuart Parkinson

Our colleagues in Medact – a UK organisation of health professionals which campaigns on peace, justice and environmental issues – organised this conference together with the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW). The event brought together several hundred campaigners, health professionals, scientists and others from numerous countries to discuss key issues linking peace and health.

Early conference sessions focused on nuclear weapons, especially the new Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). It was IPPNW which founded the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) which had been so successful in galvanising action to bring about the treaty.

Other noteworthy sessions focused on how health professionals help those affected by war. There were inspiring stories of the work done by medics in war

zones, and a shocking presentation describing the increasing problem of hospitals being targeted by air strikes in countries such as Syria and Yemen. Veterans for Peace talked about their work to counter the propaganda of armed forces recruitment campaigns.

SGR was a supporting partner of the event, taking part in several activities. We held a reception to mark our silver anniversary, which was attended by over 60 people. Philip Webber and Stuart Parkinson briefly summarised highlights from our 25 years of activity. Philip and Stuart also gave presentations as part of the academic panels, with Philip discussing nuclear war scenarios that could lead to nuclear winter, while Stuart outlined SGR's research and campaigning on the military influence on science in the UK. Stuart also ran a workshop with ForcesWatch on military involvement in schools and universities. Vanessa Moss ran an SGR stall distributing our reports and other publications.



© SGR

Philip Webber speaking at the Health Through Peace conference