

A VOTE FOR PEACE

The 1935 'Peace Ballot'

Over the winter of 1934 - 1935, half a million volunteers went from door-to-door asking the public what they thought about armaments. It was described as 'a howling success',¹ producing a thumping majority in favour of disarmament.

This was the 'Peace Ballot', or the National Declaration on the League of Nations and Armaments to give it its full title. It has been described as 'the most impressive single enterprise launched by any modern British cause' and as Britain's first referendum.² About eleven million people voted, which was 38 percent of the population, more than the 34.19 percent who voted in the 2014 local election.³ This was a huge achievement for a private ballot, organised in just a few months without the resources of a government. The results were conclusive; across Britain, whether in Scotland, England or Wales, and of whatever social class, the public were in favour of controls on armaments by a majority of over 90 percent.

War was still fresh in the memories of most people in Britain when the ballot took place. Most people would have lost someone they knew in the First World War, and disabled veterans were a visible reminder of how physically and mentally traumatic war could be. As the next world war threatened, many worked tirelessly to prevent it. All of this helps explain why the Peace Ballot produced such a clear and overwhelming result.

Robert Cecil and the League of Nations Union

The ballot was the brainchild of Robert Cecil, Viscount of Chelwood, the then Chair of the League of Nations Union (LNU). Cecil was one of the founders of the League of Nations and also a Conservative politician. From 1916 to 1918 he had been Minister of the Blockade, aiming to damage Germany's war effort by creating shortages of supplies and food.⁴ He was criticised by some for this policy, which caused starvation amongst civilian populations, but in Cecil's

¹ Richard James Overy, *The Morbid Age Britain between the Wars* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), 234.

² Martin Ceadel, "The First British Referendum: The Peace Ballot, 1934-5," *Oxford University Press* 95, no. 377 (October 1980): 810 – 839.

³ "BBC News - Vote 2014 Election Results for the EU Parliament UK Regions," accessed May 28, 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/events/vote2014/eu-uk-results>.

⁴ "Robert Cecil - Biographical," accessed June 18, 2014, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1937/chelwood-bio.html.

view the public should take responsibility for government policies, and change the government if they did not agree with their actions.⁵

The LNU was a British organisation set up to educate the public and support the work of the League of Nations, the forerunner to the United Nations. It was an enormous organisation with almost 500,000 members.

The LNU was a politically moderate and respectable organisation that did not always see eye to eye with more radical pacifist groups like the No More War Movement. Unlike pacifists, the League of Nations Union did not advocate complete disarmament. Cecil and Noel-Baker, for instance, believed that there should be an international air force controlled by the League of Nations to keep peace, an idea pacifists (who opposed the use of force of any kind) strongly disagreed with.⁶

‘A Howling Success’

The ballot had been tried out on a smaller scale in Ilford, Essex. Although this had been a success, the LNU’s executive committee quailed at the amount of work involved in a national ballot. Couldn’t they do a few more pilots first?

Cecil won out, and the League set about organising the ballot through their local branches and appealing for funds. By August 1934, 34 other organisations had been persuaded to join in. These ranged from the Communist Party to the Association of Headmistresses. Some pacifist groups abstained.⁷

Half a million people, the majority of them women, trod the doorsteps for six months, come rain or shine. They doggedly went back to houses, usually more than once, to collect as many ballot papers as they could. Over 14 million leaflets and other documents were printed for distribution during the Peace Ballot.⁸

The voting rate varied in different areas of the country, and in different constituencies, but the total vote was usually at least 50 percent of the electorate, and in Wales (where women’s peace activism was especially strong), over 60 percent voted.

The Results Come In

⁵ “Susan Pedersen Reviews ‘The British People and the League of Nations’ by Helen McCarthy and ‘A Lark for the Sake of Their Country’ by Rachele Hope Saltzman · LRB 8 August 2013,” accessed June 18, 2014, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n15/susan-pedersen/triumph-of-the-poshocracy>.

⁶ Overy, *The Morbid Age Britain between the Wars*, 231 –232.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 261.

Peace Ballot Questions	Answer ⁹
Should Britain remain a member of the League of Nations?	YES – 97%
Are you in favour of the all-round reduction of arms by international agreement?	YES – 92%
Are you in favour of the all-round abolition of national military and naval aircraft by international agreement?	YES – 82.5%
Should the manufacture and sale of armaments for private profit be prohibited by international agreement?	YES – 90.1%
Do you consider that, if a nation insists on attacking another, the other nations should combine to compel it to stop by (a) economic and non-military measures?	YES – 86.8%
(b) if necessary, military measures ?	YES – 58.7%

The results above show how overwhelmingly popular the ideas of the League of Nations and disarmament were at the time. Strikingly, even areas where arms firms employed many local people - Sheffield, Barrow-in-Furness , Coventry, Portsmouth, Birmingham – voted in favour of abolishing the private trade in armaments.

This was not a pacifist vote. The fifth question shows that the public were in favour of implementing sanctions should one nation attack another, while a smaller majority agreed with using military measures if necessary.

A Democratic Affair

Miss Courtenay, part of the LNU deputation to Prime Minister Baldwin concerning the ballot, spoke of how it appealed to women as a democratic process.¹⁰ Universal suffrage had only been created in 1928, and so women’s enthusiasm for democracy was particularly high.

⁹ Ceadel, “The First British Referendum: The Peace Ballot, 1934-5,” 828.

¹⁰ “Foreign Policy: Deputation from Organisers of the Peace Ballot Calling for Disarmament,” 1935, Kew, National Archives.

The Peace Ballot results threw down the gauntlet to the government to do something about disarmament and the private manufacture of arms. The official report of the ballot argues:

‘Obviously, the thing to do was to ask John Smith and Mary Brown. It was so obvious, so audaciously simple, that nobody had ever thought of doing it ... If our democracy is a true democracy ... the sum of their opinions, are ... the rock on which the fabric of our government is based’.¹¹

A Leeds headmaster wrote to his local MP to say how, standing before an assembly of 450 boys who were likely to fight in the next war, he had become furious about the ballot being ignored by Parliament. He said:

‘We live in an age of democracy, and if those who normally represent us...are not prepared to face the issue, they are morally bound to get out.’¹²

Influential or Ignored?

The Peace Ballot can be considered the ‘high watermark’ of public support for the League of Nations.¹³ However, it is difficult to judge exactly what effect it had on the government. The Conservative Party was generally unsupportive of disarmament and limiting the private manufacture of arms, but at the same time it needed to appease public opinion which clearly desired both of these things. The Labour Party was little better. Just before the Peace Ballot commenced, Labour Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald told Cecil he thought gestures such as their campaign were ineffective, saying: ‘International opinion is not influenced by them and governments resent them.’¹⁴

The government may not have liked the Peace Ballot but its results forced them to recognise the strength of feeling in support of disarmament. The Peace Ballot probably contributed to the Royal Commission for the Private Manufacture of and Trading in Arms being established to consider banning the private arms sector. The ballot was an impressive feat of voluntary activity but is little remembered today, perhaps because as the results were announced the next war was already on the horizon.

Researcher: Sue Smith

¹¹ National Declaration Committee of the LNU, *The Peace Ballot: The Official History*, 1935.

¹² Ceadel, M., *Pacifism in Britain 1931-39*, PhD thesis, Oxford, 1976, 196.

¹³ Overy, *The Morbid Age Britain between the Wars*, 234.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 234 – 235.