

Peggy Hope-Simpson: A Lifetime of Activism

by Sarah Story

The first time I met Peggy Hope-Simpson at the Peace Vigil in Wolfville I was struck by her congeniality, genuine wisdom, and impeccable verbal articulation attribute that have resulted from a lifetime of active community engagement in decision-making processes, policy development and independent study. Peggy has played many central roles as an advocate and organizer in areas such as agriculture, education, health care, peace and security, social housing and women. From a life history interview here are some excerpts dealing with peace and common security issues that more than any other define her role as an activist and prompted her to run for the NDP. These issues continue to drive her passion and community activism. Here is how Peggy defines an activist, and how one recognizes one's passion and direction:

--- "It is a means of having an impact on power structures. An impact on what happens and how power is used. It's all about power - who has it, who doesn't have it, and how you get it...It puzzled me for a long time as to why many people were for peace, but so few, relatively speaking, could actually do something about it, or were willing to do something about it. I started exploring that. What is it that makes an activist different? Is it experience? I came to the conclusion that it is your understanding of what reality is. It is recognizing and naming realities that is central. Albert Camus once said, 'You do not know who you are, until you name the reality of what it is that you must resist.'...That stuck with me all these years." ---

Peggy and her husband David had become sensitized to the horrors and devastation of warfare during the Second World War. Her resistance began during the Cold War, an overtly ideological war that drew down the Iron Curtain between East and West and placed American capitalism in direct political economic, military, technological, and cultural competition with Soviet communism. Under real threat of nuclear obliteration, bombing drills, and gas masks, fallout shelters were used to sooth fear about personal and national security and avoid mass panic as nuclear tension rose on both sides of the Iron Curtain, Peggy was then living in Halifax, nursing her new baby daughter. The aggressive military strategy and fragile political atmosphere that had inspired fear prompted her to initiate the Nova Scotia Chapter of the Voice of Women (VOW). This was the first female-led Canadian organization to commit to promoting justice, peaceful resolution, and mutual global respect through education and participation in decision-making processes.

--- "The formation of VOW was due mostly to young mothers who were fearful for their children and the future. It had instant membership; 10,000 members in a year. It was 1959 and my family had only been in Halifax one or two years. One day, David came home from Saint Mary's University with the news that a group of women [was] trying to form a national Voice of Women. They had the name of a Dartmouth woman who they thought might be willing to get this going in NS, and asked if [David] would make contact with her. I immediately said, "I'll do this!" So I got involved and called a few people, including Muriel Duckworth. She had a good reputation and was a sound woman. We convened a meeting, and [thanks to] some good contacts at the CBC, we could leak things to [the media].

A major preoccupation was race relations in Halifax. We invited a well-known black woman, Pearlene Oliver, wife of a Baptist minister in Halifax. We began to talk about the race

situation. Their perspective was that you could not talk about peace and international relations until you dealt with the peace issue at home. There was no disagreement with that. The problem was how to divide our energies. There were many young mothers with children and other responsibilities. So, we decided to have two focuses in the organization - national and international - we tackled our own deficient Canadian defence policy, and position in NATO. Gradually, we got brave enough to do this and took on the defence establishment." ---

Did VOW get much media coverage?

--- "Oh yes. We were soundly criticized. The media was very conservative. Charles Lynch, then a prominent CBC national commentator, wrote scathing articles. He said we had no expertise; we were a bunch of meddling housewives. He actually said those words." ---

Until quite recently, the political sphere was a males-only domain. VOW and women who joined the peace movement swiftly entered the public and political arena. This was a challenge to male officials, their political stances, and military strategies. Consequently, these female activists faced harsh public criticism, and in some cases, ostracism.

--- "In 1961, I went to a meeting in Halifax's Military Museum with Nato big-wigs. One, Major General Foulkes, Secretary General of NATO, was incredibly condescending, scornful, and dismissive of the women willing to criticize NATO. I could feel my gorge rising, until it was no longer controllable. I had no idea what I was going to say, but I stood up anyway. I was just so annoyed! After I sat down, there was an absolute deathly silence. I think what I said was, 'How dare you speak about women so disrespectfully. How dare you?' Then, all of these heads turned, of all of these admirals wives, and somebody got up a few rows behind me. A young man spoke in support of what I had said. Again - a deathly silence. After it was over, I went out into the foyer and people I had known quite well from school and the community just shunned me. They just looked away." ---

Gaining support of the general public was difficult. Even the clergy and most Halifax academics did not support our stance.

--- "I thought surely the clergy will see the moral issue of this. But apart from Anglican clergyman, Russell Elliott they wouldn't support it. I remember a debate at Saint Mary's. The Jesuit priests actually debated whether it was morally justified to kill three or four million people to defeat communism, and beat 'the red threat'. That was a dreadful period full of apathy. Deadly silence. An oppressive period for women. I think we were the first women to break the silence." ---

Despite opposition, the peace movement gained momentum.

--- "We were just ready to go. Someone said it was like mushrooms springing up across the country overnight. Everywhere women just saying: OK! Here's the agenda. Let's get to it." (Note 1) ---

VOW prompted many women to get involved in other civic and peace organizations. After her intense involvement in the early formative period of VOW, Peggy began to look for new directions and focus on ways to address the NATO issue.

--- "I thought that there must be military people thinking constructively. So, I began to look into the world of strategic studies, and I got to know a few military strategists at Dalhousie and at Acadia. This was in the 1980's. I came to feel that the position of the NDP on NATO was wrong, and 'getting out of NATO' was not what was needed to alleviate the threat. What we needed to do was change the security policy of NATO. Getting out of it would mean that you have no influence at all...The NDP's security policy was based on the nuclear threat. The threat is so overwhelming that no one dare attack us - the nuclear deterrence thinking. This was, and still is, so engrained." ---

Peggy then explained the value of sharing information and ideas with those who hold opposing views and values. This is a story about her encounters with a military strategist:

--- "[in 1980] we organized a peace conference. At my suggestion we invited a few strategic studies people, [including] a young British strategic studies scholar, who was visiting Dalhousie. One day, I said to him: 'It's absolutely [incredible] that someone of your intelligence can believe some of that stuff.' He was so shocked that he had to think about [this statement]. So, we set up an exchange. He would drop off stuff that he wanted me to read and I would drop off stuff for him to read. He was trying to make me into a military strategist, and I was trying to make him into a peace activist. [At the conference] he'd never been so terrified or nervous in all of his life having to meet all of these peaceniks. When he went back to Europe, his parting gift to me was an Oxfam poster of a stone wall with a big crack down through it. [The caption read], 'Do not accept what you see, there is a fault in reality.' [Later in England there were] huge peace demonstrations. Three million people out on the streets [protesting] British nuclear weapons. There were women protesters who set up a camp at Greenham Common, where the Cruise missiles and fighters carrying the missiles were to be housed. There were huge protests about it. [My friend] went to some of these big protests and I would receive bulletins from him and clippings from "The Times". One image showed all these women who chained themselves to fences. That impressed him. He stayed in his job, but he totally changed his focus." ---

The man that Peggy is referring to is Ken Booth, a well-published academic known for a radical position that he developed and labelled "utopian realism". He says that in order to understand human rights, we need to understand the history of how they arose and why they are needed. He believes cultures are not fixed and cannot be discussed in absolute terms. Universalism in human rights should not be denied, for they are needed to curb the harm that humans have done to each other throughout history. In 2011, Booth paid tribute to Peggy in an article published for the Centre for International and Strategic Studies:

A Canadian peace campaigner, Peggy Hope-Simpson, refused to accept that somebody she took to be reasonably sane, and certainly knowledgeable about such matters, could actually believe what I was teaching students in such areas as nuclear deterrence and arms control. She insisted I talk to her and her group about such realist truisms as the 'inescapable' war system, the 'impossibility' of disarmament, the 'rational' relationship between military power and national security, the 'perpetual' nuclear peace, the 'just' nuclear deterrent and this being 'the best of all possible worlds'. (Note 2)

The advocacy and organizing efforts of David and Peggy Hope-Simpson, Russell Elliott, and others led, in the fall of 1984 to five communities in Nova Scotia becoming nuclear weapon-free zones, including Wolfville, where people voted 75% in favour of the ban. The peace movement was a time of personal growth, and active involvement that later influenced Peggy's involvement with the NDP. In 1984, she was the local candidate for the Annapolis Valley in the federal election. Asked why she decided to run, she replied:

--- "It was peace issues. [Not everyone] appreciated my views and attitude on NATO and I did not agree with Party policy. It wasn't a happy campaign. I was quite pleased that I got 16% which was pretty good. I got my deposit back and the [riding] association \$3000-\$4000. After, I sat back and licked my wounds. Even when you know you are going to lose, it is still pretty devastating. Not long after, I [was invited by] the NDP Women's Rights Committee to represent Nova Scotia on the International Affairs Committee. I started making trips to Ottawa and getting involved in NDP policy development. I got into an argument right away with Pauline Jewett and Dan Heap - the old war horses of the Party - on the 'out of NATO' policy. I said, 'It is not a policy. It is just a stand that you take, and it's the wrong one. A policy has to be about security.' I had learned this from my strategic studies friends. I said, 'You do not have a peace policy without a security policy.' That put a whole new slant on things, and over the next three years we put together a policy on paper, "Canada's Stake in Common Security". It's a wonderful document." ---

In April 1988, the NDP security policy was outlined in this document. It offered an alternative to offensive, aggressive Cold War strategy. It embraced the principle of "common security", which stated that the security of our nation can only be possible if the security of other nations is also recognized. The policy called for war prevention, tension reduction, non-offensive decision making to address common security, an end to cruise missile testing, and avoidance of involvement with U.S. Strategic Defence Initiative or the Air Defence Initiative. (Note 3). It called for Canada to take an activist role in NATO and to press for nuclear disarmament, arms control, and no first-use of nuclear weapons. Peggy's expertise greatly influenced the direction of the policy, but she did not stop there. In the mid-eighties, she travelled throughout Scandinavia to learn more about their peace and security policies. In 1988, she participated in an international conference on the Arctic. This experience prompted her to reflect on the ways that Canada could retain security. In 1989, she wrote:

--- "The pursuit of security is a political task. To be sure, international agreements need to be backed by adequate military force, but not overwhelming force. We should return to a view of defence that is not perceived as offensive. We should resume protecting our sovereignty by Canadian means. Almost forgotten is the February 1947 Canada - U.S. Joint Statement on Defence Collaboration, whereby; "each country retains control over military activities undertaken on its territory and is legally free to determine the extent of its military cooperation with the other." Clearly, we share interests with the United States, the Soviet Union, and the Nordic countries. We have so much in common that we should work toward developing confidence-building measures, cooperative measures of restraint and reassurance. Our Government's policy should reflect these shared interests. Canadians would support such a shift in foreign policy. (Note 4)." ---

In this article, Peggy pointed out that Prime Minister Mulroney has promised to protect Canadian sovereignty from closer integration with the USA, and that the clarification of Canada's policy of security, sovereignty, arms control, and disarmament was necessary. She argued that a public and "open review

of the political-diplomatic opportunities" was needed, and concluded that "as a democratic society, Canada's national objectives should be determined by the people of Canada."

The international peace movement gained global momentum during the Cold War as widespread uncertainty and insecurity rose about the nuclear threat, along with economic instability. Then, in 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. Shortly after, Gorbachev and Bush Sr. officially declared an end to the Cold War. Peggy explained:

--- "The peace movement went downhill after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Communist governments, one after the other, all across Eastern Europe. The nuclear threat was still there, but nobody saw it that way. It was [considered] to be the 'Russian Threat'. The Soviet Union had disappeared and Gorbachev was our 'hero'. It was supposed to be a peace dividend after that. But, that just got swallowed up in the ethnic wars." ---

In the early nineties, Peggy dropped out of the peace movement. She explained:

--- "I didn't know where it could go. I think it was a loss of an entire direction, in terms of how to carry it forward. [Our focus had been on the] relationship between Canada and the USA, Canada and NATO, trying to change Canadian foreign policy. Yet, there was no kind of tacit agreement in Canada. We [still] don't have a clear sense of national purpose. In my view [what] is needed now is common security. You can only be secure if you want your neighbour to be secure. This is the whole principle of interdependence." ---

Do you think the nuclear issue has revived itself in recent years?

--- "There are a few encouraging things. One thing I had not realized until a short while ago was that Canada, actually in January of last year, voted unanimously in the House of Commons to be part of the U.N. Five Point Plan for Nuclear Disarmament. This supports the Nuclear Convention for the abolition of nuclear weapons. Long-range weapons are the biggest threat to countries around the world, the intermediate range covers parts of Europe to the Soviet Union and then there are short range weapons. There have to be treaties on all the ranges. Another part of the Convention is that there will be a ban on fissionable materials. This limits testing, and eventually will affect the export of nuclear uranium. It has profound effects that are wide ranging." ---

Peggy believes that cooperation, such as that used in these talks, can be used by the NDP. she thinks that it is possible to cooperate without losing political identity.

--- "It seems to me that we need to look at all the things we dislike about the Conservatives now, and how Harper uses his power. Their policy, which I find very chilling, is to make this country a conservative culture. If it's all about culture, we [the NDP] had better get into culture-building. What kind of a culture is it we are going to build? If it's social democracy that we want, then we must [discuss openly] what that means. And it's not just the social policies - it is the process that gets you there." ---

Have you thought of ways to get there"?

--- "I fall back on the principles of common security that helped us get through the Cold War and helped

in disbanding some nuclear weapons. What are these basic principles? First of all, if you are building confidence, then you are not doing things that frighten people. You are not instilling fear, which the Conservatives love to do. You are trying to create confidence so people can use their human capacities for change. To deliberately do these things, we need to have a profound change in our culture - something that everyone can start practising. We can make it a principle of governing. Confidence building, restraint, transparency - these principles were all first articulated by the Swedish military. This is what was so startling to me in 1986 when I was reading for the first time about the principles of common security. I just was so astonished at what I was reading because it came from the military mind." ---

Could you explain what you mean by restraint?

--- "Non-offensive defence. that means you hold back, rather than doing the most extreme thing. A non-offensive defence - that was a direct response to weapons at the time. Who's going to be the recipient to these weapons? These things [should be] spelled out in our common security philosophy for political action and change in our political sphere. We are trying to change the political culture. I suggest that those tools, the principles of common security, are the way to do it. I've never seen that expressed. It means not only changing our own thinking, but changing our own behaviour. We have to change our attitudes and how we respond to conflict. What I look for in a leader is an [understanding of] conflict. It is not to say that we do not have real disagreements. We do. But it matters how you disagree and how you carry on." ---

Peggy credits her son Michael, who developed a set of tools to address problematic issues in underdeveloped countries, for prompting her to think about this issue. Michael creates, facilitates, and mediates results-based management workshops with international multi stakeholders. One of the aims of the workshops is to help stake-holders find common ground. Peggy stated that we could all learn from this process:

--- "If we were [seeking] some sort of collaboration - finding shared values and common ground - this is where we would start. Processes are just as important as the end product." ---

I believe that Peggy is right. There is a need for change in our increasingly divisive and exclusive political culture. To do so, finding shared values and resisting divisiveness is crucial to the process. As a Party, we need to publicly define "socialism" and "social democracy". This will require patience, cooperation, and a lot more genuine discussion. Common security can be the base from which to launch this discussion as it extends to economic and social spheres. Arguably, this is a major part of the Occupy Movement. Thousands are questioning and challenging current inequities and beginning to develop new ways we can move forward together, in the spirit of creating common security for all. Once we engage in the discussion, consensus-based decision making processes, and collectively act upon our principles, we will begin to see that common security is not only necessary - it is possible. Even if one calls this "utopian realism" - it is an ideal that can be realized.

NOTES

1. "The Voice of Women: Canada decides its nuclear future while women speak out against weapons." Canada: A Peoples History. CBC. Accessed November, 2011. <http://www.cbc.ca>

2. Ken Booth, "Security and Self Reflections of a Fallen Realist, Centre for International and Strategic Studies", York University, Toronto, (May, 1994): 11. Accessed December, 2011.

<http://www.yorku.ca/ciciss/publications/OP26-Booth.pdf>

3. Jillian Skeet, "The NDP Security Policy", Peace Magazine (June-July 1988): 18. Accessed December, 2011,

<http://peacemagazine.org>

4. Peggy Hope-Simpson, "Getting Secure", Peace Magazine, (Feb-March, 1989): 11. Accessed December, 2011,

<http://peacemagazine.org>