

Praying for Peace, Paying for War?

By Tony McQuail

MILITARY TAXATION BROUGHT ME TO CANADA. At that time, I was prepared to go to prison as my way of opposing the war in Viet Nam. But as I looked to the future, I realised that to stay true to my leadings I would also have to be a tax resister after prison because around 50% of the U.S. federal budget goes to the military. I decided to come to Canada, hoping it would be a country where I could feel clear about paying taxes.

In the early 1970s, Canada had a federal budget more focused on healthcare, education and equalization payments than on war. Canadians were involved in “peace keeping” around the world. I felt clear in paying my taxes. Recently, I have been feeling less clear. There are various options open to Canadians who don’t want to pay for war while they are working and praying for peace. Different Friends will be led to different actions: “pay thy taxes as long as thou canst” but when thou canst no longer, what are the options and what are the implications?

I asked Chris Springer, of Kitchener Area Monthly Meeting, to share his experience on this question. His thoughts demonstrate that the same Friend may be lead to different actions at different times.

“Over the years since 1979, I’ve done many things to deal with my conscientious objection to paying military taxes. Initially I did a great deal of letter writing to Members of Parliament to try to persuade the government to set up a Peace Tax Fund. For a couple of years I refused to assist the tax collection system by filling out my tax returns. I sent all the necessary information. They sent me the refund I had coming as though I had filled out the form.

“There were two years when I owed a small amount. The first year I made my cheque out to “Receiver General In Trust for Peace Tax Fund”. When they cashed it, I had a considerable correspondence with the Finance and Revenue Ministers over their responsibility to use it

under the terms on my cheque. The second year I sent it to Conscience Canada and Revenue Canada collected it from my refund the following year. I also had several exchanges of letters with the head of the Canadian Human Rights Commission. He raised it with the government but to no avail.

“In later years I tried to divert as much of my money as I could to peaceful causes and thus reduce my income taxes. Currently all my “tax diversion” occurs through charitable donations.”

WHAT ARE THE OPTIONS?

Living on a low income. Some chose to earn incomes below the taxable level so they pay no military or other federal income taxes. Living at this level may also be seen as an act of solidarity with the poor and oppressed around the world. In 2001, a taxable income under \$7,412 paid no federal income tax.

Tax Resistance. Some calculate their taxes payable and then withhold the portion that would be used for military purposes, banking it with a trustee organization, such as Conscience Canada (see box on page 19), which agrees to hold it in trust until there is a legally recognized option for conscientious objectors to military taxation. Some chose to send the money directly to organizations working for peace. Withholding taxes is in violation of the Income Tax Act; Revenue Canada will file an assessment showing that taxes are due. If the taxes due are not paid, Revenue Canada may simply take the money from future refunds or GST rebates. However, they can seize the money from your accounts, do audits, and engage in harassment activities. In 2002, the military share of the federal budget was 6.4%. To figure out the amount to withhold, calculate 6.4% of your taxes payable. This is the amount to be withheld when filing your tax return.

Redirecting income. Some chose to make charitable donations to peace, social justice, or environmental

groups for a “non-refundable tax credit” equivalent to what would have been the income tax’s military portion. Gifts to governments or the United Nations also qualify for a “non-refundable tax credit” and can be used to reduce taxes payable by the equivalent of the military portion. Some use a donation to a federal political party to get the “political tax credit” and reduce taxes payable in this way. Reducing taxes payable through donations is legal, though somewhat complicated. Charitable donations are multiplied by 29% to yield “non-refundable tax credits.” This means that it takes \$3.45 donated to a charitable organization to reduce taxes payable by \$1.00. Thus, one would need to send 3.45 times the military portion of one’s taxes to appropriate charities before December 31 to get a “non-refundable tax credit” to reduce taxes by that amount. An alternative is to make charitable donations before the year end; later, when filing income tax, deem certain of those donations to have been for the purpose of reducing the military share of taxes. You could also redirect most of your military taxes but withhold a symbolic amount and send it to a trustee organization.

Sharing your witness with others can expand the public understanding of conscientious objection to military taxation. It is helpful to write a letter to accompany the tax return, which can clarify your position to the staff who deal with the return. To take the concern to political representatives, send copies to the Minister of Finance, Minister of Revenue, your local Member of Parliament and the Prime Minister. A letter to the editor of the local paper shares it with neighbours. A copy to Conscience Canada, even if you use an alternative to their trusteeship, advises them of support and concern for peace tax options.

Being true to “that spirit which takes away the occasion for all wars” may call us to wrestle with our decisions around paying taxes. May we be as successful as William Penn in unbuckling our swords and seeing what love can do. □

Tony McQuail is a member of Lucknow Worship Group, which is under the care of Kitchener Area Monthly Meeting.

CONSCIENCE CANADA REVITALIZATION

Conscience Canada (CC) is an organization dedicated to the cause of conscientious objection to military taxation. Over the past 20 years, hundreds of Canadians have deposited their military taxes in CC’s Peace Tax Trust Fund, where the money is held until the government will guarantee its use for peaceful purposes. CC has also provided a visible witness for freedom of conscience. It has helped organize lobbying drives to Ottawa to push for recognition of the legal right to conscientious objection (CO) to military taxation, which are believed to be guaranteed through provisions for freedom of conscience and religion in Article 2a of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. CC has supported private members’ bills in the House of Commons which would give this right to all COs. It has maintained connections with the international movement for war tax resistance and promoted public education on this issue.

Struggling for survival for several years, CC was transferred from Victoria to Toronto in the fall of 2002. A new board was constituted. They plan to operate at low cost, without an office or staff, and hope to revitalize this movement.

Anyone wishing to be a conscientious objector to military taxation (COMT) can express this desire by depositing a symbolic amount, large or small, into the Peace Tax Trust Fund. CC will produce a newsletter early in 2003 to guide tax filing for 2002, and is soliciting volunteers to work on simple educational kits.

Contact them at: Conscience Canada,
901 - 70 Mill Street, Toronto ON, M5A 4R1
Email: <bruna.nota@utoronto.ca>
Phone and fax: (416) 203-1402

Organizations which qualify for charitable donations, and which may be of interest to Friends, include.

- Canadian Yearly Meeting, 91A Fourth Avenue, Ottawa, ON, K1S 2L1
- Canadian Friends Service Committee, 60 Lowther Avenue, Toronto, ON, M5R 1C7
- *The Canadian Friend*, c/o Business Manager, 1371 Argenta Road, Argenta, BC, V0G 1B0
- Christian Peacemaker Teams, c/o Mennonite Church Canada, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd. Winnipeg, MB, R3P 0M4
- Peace Brigades International, 427 Bloor Street West, Suite 201, Toronto, ON, M5S 1X7
- Friends Committee on Unity with Nature (FCUN) Canadian charitable donations to FCUN can be made through Canadian Yearly Meeting, with a note saying they are for FCUN.