



THE PEOPLE'S CONVENTION, 1940-1941 A SOVIET STALKING HORSE?

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On 12 January 1941, at the Royal Hotel in central London, the self-styled 'People's Convention' assembled to launch a wartime political movement to demand a British government that genuinely reflected the needs of the people, and could broker a people's peace. The popular response to the Convention was muted and within a year the organisers suspended its activity. Historians have given the movement scant regard. Andrew Thorpe in his study of wartime political parties gives the Convention no more than a passing mention as part of the perceived though limited threat of Communist activism in 1940-41 [THORPE, *Parties at War* : 129, 201]. Sonya Rose in her study of Britain's 'people's war' gives it no mention at all [ROSE, 2003]; Paul Addison's *Road to 1945* is equally silent about a movement whose temporary publicity in 1940-41 makes wartime consensus at best a relative reality. Dan Todman in his panoramic history of Britain [TODMAN : 611-612] and Geoffrey Field in his study of Britain's wartime working class give a brief and not wholly accurate account of a movement they see as entirely communist-inspired [FIELD : 90-91, 314-316]. It is necessary to go back to Angus Calder's 1969 classic *The People's War* to find at least an account of the Convention conference itself, though Calder viewed the initiative in largely negative terms. At the time, and since, the People's Convention movement has been regarded as a thinly-veiled Communist front set up to compensate for the unpopularity of the Communist Party of Great Britain in the shadow of the German-Soviet Pact of August 1939 and the Soviet war on Finland [THORPE, *The British Communist Party and Moscow* : 264]. A week after the meeting in London, the Communist mouthpiece, *The Daily Worker*, a consistent supporter of the People's Convention, was closed down on the orders of the Home Secretary. The People's Convention was defined by the Ministry of Home Security as 'subversive' [TNA, HO 199/478].

There is little doubt that British Communists and their sympathisers contributed to the establishment of the People's Convention, though not only Communists; nor can it be argued that the movement in the end had anything but a marginal impact on British politics in the first two years of war. It is nevertheless of more than historical curiosity to understand how a vocal anti-government movement could function in wartime at a time when Britain faced the deepest crisis of the war, and be tolerated by authorities keen to minimise any evidence that the home front was not solidly united behind the war effort. It is the purpose of this article to argue that the movement must be

understood as something more than a short-term Communist political gambit. The People's Convention movement says something about the complex and contested nature of British public engagement with the war effort and about public imagination of a postwar world which was not exclusively Communist. Like the Bombing Restriction Committee, which emerged a few months after the founding of the People's Convention in order to campaign head-on against the strategy of bombing German cities by night, the movement challenged the mood of wartime consensus and demonstrated the possibility of multiple, and sometimes discordant discourses in shaping public perception of the war and its leaders [OVERY, 'Constructing Space for Dissent in War'].

To understand the origins and evolution of the People's Convention, it must be set in the broader historical context of the late 1930s and the onset of war. The notion of a 'People's Government' or popular front was hardly new in 1941. The hostility to waging an imperialist, bosses' war, was also a product of left-wing and pacifist anti-militarism from at least the mid-1930s, if not earlier. The practical concern that not enough was being done to provide the working class with adequate air-raid shelter, which was the most immediately relevant plank in the movement's platform, had been a bone of contention before the war as left-wing scientists, architects and local officials tried to persuade the government unsuccessfully of the need for 'deep shelters'. Political sympathy for the Soviet Union and its people, which was point five of the movement's programme, ran as a thick thread through the 1930s and continued into wartime, despite the German-Soviet Pact and the Soviet invasion of Finland in November 1939, which the mainstream labour movement in Britain strongly condemned. Finally, the movement's decision to identify with the anti-colonial lobby and freedom for India, linked it to a decade or more of British protest against the abuses of Empire. The 500 sponsors who signed in support of the meeting in January 1941 included some well-known names identified with pre-war movements, protests or petitions – the scientists J.H.B. Haldane and Hyman Levy, the clerics Hewlett Johnson (the Red Dean), Mervyn Stockwood, and Stanley Evans, the actors Michael Redgrave and Beatrix Lehmann – but chiefly a large number of trade union officials and organisers who saw the Convention in terms of the longer struggle to protect working-class interests after the inter-war depression.¹ Seen from the perspective of continuities with the 1930s, the People's Convention appears at once less anomalous, building on initiatives and mobilising sentiments that are historically recognisable from the pre-war years.

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This article seeks to explore the context more fully in order to give the movement greater historical depth, but it is first necessary to outline its immediate origins and brief history. The People's Convention left little archival footprint, which may well explain the lack of historical interest in its brief flourishing. It is necessary to rely on the Convention's own publications, broadsheets, conference programmes and propaganda as the movement's principal archive. Mass Observation provides a full account of the initial People's Convention congress in London, and subsequent comment, while the survey of the movement's 'subversive' status provides some additional material in The National Archives from the Ministry of Home Security and the Ministry of Information. There are brief references in the Pritt papers in the London School of Economics, and in the Communist Party of Great Britain collection

¹ List of 500 sponsors in *The People's Convention for a People's Government : Free Trade Hall Manchester, January 12 1941*, National Committee, People's Vigilance, November 1940.

in the People's History Museum in Manchester. The broader context in which the movement can be placed is more easily accessed through private papers, organisational records and the publicity generated by a variety of movements and lobby groups from the 1930s and on into the war, while contemporary publications on issues from air-raid shelters to popular fronts supply much of the evidence of continuity.

The People's Convention emerged from initiatives taken in June 1940, after the disaster in France, by left-wing circles highly critical of the way the war had been handled by a predominantly Conservative National Government. The Hammersmith branch of the Labour Party and the Hammersmith Trades Council set up informal discussions to establish a provisional committee to mobilise the discontent, encouraged by the Labour MP for Hammersmith, Denis Pritt, who had been expelled from the Party earlier in the year for his support of the Soviet war against Finland. At a meeting in Holborn Hall, Kingsway on 7 July 1940, attended by a range of Labour Party, Trade Union and Communist Party members, a 'People's Vigilance Committee' was established consisting of Pritt, Harry Adams, the London organiser of the Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers, W. 'Dick' Squance, former secretary of ASLEF, and Labour councillor J.E. Skilbeck, London organiser of the Woodworkers' Union [BRANSON : 290-291; PRITT : I, 247-249]. The latter three were still Labour Party members, but were immediately expelled, like Pritt, from the Party. The Hammersmith Labour Party and Trades Council were also disaffiliated and then reorganised, along with a number of other Labour Party branches who supported People's Vigilance; by February 1941 33 members had been expelled by Labour's executive and 55 by local Labour Party branches [THORPE, *Parties at War* : 129, 201]. The initiative was supported by Rajani Palme Dutt, appointed in October 1939 as effective general secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain following the resignation of Harry Pollitt, who found it hard to embrace the party line from Moscow after the Pact. Dutt used the *Labour Monthly*, which he edited, to advertise the new committee and to encourage the development of local Vigilance Committees to raise the profile of the new movement [CALLAGHAN : 193-194; STAMMERS : 103]. The movement was helped by the sudden expansion of readership for the *Labour Monthly*, whose sales leapt from 7,500 in August 1939 to more than 20,000 by December 1940. *Labour Monthly* discussion groups also rapidly expanded countrywide across 1940-41, from only a handful in early 1940, to 83 a year later, and over 200 by June 1941 [*Labour Monthly* 23/1 (January 1941) : 2]. The Communist *Daily Worker* added to support for the movement. In June 1940 the composition of the editorial board was made public for the first time. The chairman was the Marxist scientist J.B.S. Haldane (he joined the Communist Party only in 1942), who became a key member of the future Convention for his promotion of effective bomb-proof shelters in working-class districts [BRANSON : 291-292].

The National People's Vigilance Committee initially drew up five principal demands at the initial congress: to get rid of the 'men of Munich' still in the government; to develop friendship with the Soviet Union; to reestablish democratic rights; to defend living standards and end alleged profiteering; and finally to form a new 'people's government' to provide the conditions for establishing a 'people's peace'. The central ambition of the new movement was to organise a People's Convention which would publicly rally all the forces opposed to the current government around the slogans adopted in July 1940. A national organisation was set up based in High Holborn, London and the communist Ben Bradley appointed as national organiser of what was

now called the People's Convention. While local vigilance committees were established principally across the major industrial regions and the London area, the national organisation drew up a manifesto in September 1940 for the forthcoming People's Convention congress in which the original five demands were replaced by six 'points'. The demand to get rid of the 'men of Munich' was dropped, the call for a people's government and a people's peace were separated into two points, and adequate air raid precautions and post-raid welfare added as a distinct demand, consistent with the growth of popular protest over poorly constructed and insanitary shelters with the onset of the Blitz [TNA, INF 1/319; GALLACHER, 'A Letter to all Trade Unionists', 1 November 1941 : 4]. Some sense of how widely the new movement was to be publicised comes from the decision to print 250,000 copies of the manifesto leaflet. National Committee Members undertook to speak to local vigilance groups or informal meetings of shop stewards and union members, who formed the bulk of support [PRITT : 248-252].

The venue for the congress was the Free Trade Hall in Manchester, but it was damaged in the German air raids in December 1940, and a new venue had to be found at short notice. With only a week to go, the Royal Hotel in central London, only a short distance from the People's Vigilance headquarters, agreed to house the meeting in its main hall. So large was the number of delegates that the nearby Holborn Halls, both large and small, had to absorb the overflow and the main speakers went during the day from one venue to another to repeat their speeches [*The People Speak* : 3-5]. The Convention meeting on 12 January was the high point of the entire history of the movement. Against expectations that bombing, transport difficulties and cost would inhibit attendance, 2,234 delegates were present from all over the country. London was heavily overrepresented with 1,099 delegates, but 387 made the journey from northern England, and 117 from Scotland, even four from North Wales [*The People Speak* (appendix 'Delegates Present') : 59]. Among those invited to attend was Indira Nehru, daughter of the Indian Congress leader, Jawaharlal Nehru, serving four years in prison under the British raj. Paul Robeson, the singer and campaigner for American civil rights sent a message of goodwill; so too did Mao Zedong from his embattled enclave in north-west China, hoping, perhaps rather optimistically, 'for a strengthening of international militant solidarity between the British and Chinese peoples'. Three of the National Committee, Denis Pritt, Harry Adams and Dick Squance, gave the main speeches. Krishna Menon, the future Indian defence minister, spoke about empire independence and was warmly applauded. Harold Moody, the black doctor who led the London-based League of Coloured Peoples, spoke about racism, which his son, who had recently joined the Royal Air Force, experienced at first hand [BOURNE : 23-26].

Among those attending the meeting was a Mass Observation reporter, working now ostensibly for the Ministry of Information's Home Intelligence department, who listened closely to the delegates in the lobbies and auditorium. The report concluded that men outnumbered women by three-to-one; that most delegates were between 25 and 35, with very few over 50; and that the delegates were overwhelmingly from the skilled working class, with a leavening of unskilled workers, but very few visibly 'middle class' [MO 54/3 : 1]. Talk in the meeting and in the lobbies focused on peace, although the Convention was not intended to be pacifist. The reporter thought the meeting displayed a 'general feeling of ideological and spiritual starvation and bewilderment', reflecting a desire to address major issues rather than focus on material problems such as shelters, food, and labour conditions, which the Convention

speakers addressed in detail. The atmosphere was hopeful and enthusiastic, but the widely discussed question 'what is the Convention going to lead to?' suggested that the Convention was a starting point with no clear direction [MO 54/3 : 2-3].

The main practical issue was to appoint a national committee. The executive consisted of Harry Adams as chair, the former naval officer Edgar Young, a prominent anti-war campaigner in the 1930s, as vice-chair, Dick Squance as secretary and Denis Pritt as treasurer, all four recently expelled from the Labour Party; the full national committee had 26 members, drawn chiefly from among trade union delegates (including the communist Arthur Horner, president of the South Wales Miners' Federation) but also including public figures who supported the campaign, among them Haldane, the Dean of Canterbury, and Krishna Menon representing the India League [*Forward to a People's Government* : 3]. The committee then presented to the Convention each aspect of the Convention programme, but two additional points were added, both more radical in content than the original six. Point (4) of the programme now read 'Emergency powers to take over the banks, land, transport, armaments and other large industries...', echoing demands already evident in the 1930s for a more state-run economy. Point (5) called for independence for India, self-determination for the colonies, and an end to the 'enforced partition of Ireland' [*The People Speak* : 20]. Both of these additions represented very large issues over the future of the British economy and the Empire, but there is little to indicate why they were added at this juncture, although Ben Bradley, the Convention national organiser, also drafted the Communist Party study syllabus on 'The Colonies and the Future' endorsing self-determination [BRADLEY, *The Colonies and the Future*], while the inclusion of Menon on the National Committee demonstrated that the People's Convention was now intended to apply to the wider Empire. The issue of a united Ireland, however, remained dormant in the year of publications that followed.

The question of where the Convention was going to lead was indeed an apt one. The organisers saw the meeting itself as 'something momentous in the history of our country', but the direct consequences scarcely matched the rhetoric [*The People Speak* : 3]. Local Convention meetings continued, but the emphasis of the national committee was to identify with current protests, publishing special newsheets and pamphlets on food, the role of women in wartime and the campaign for better shelter accommodation, rather than mobilise protest more fully for a people's government and a people's peace. The London People's Convention met again at the Royal Hotel on 16 March, but the national committee recalled an emergency session of the Convention only once more after January, on 5 July 1941, in response to the German invasion of the Soviet Union [*Labour Monthly*, 23/3 (March 1941); PRITT : 272]. The venue was the Stoll Picture House in Kingsway, again only a few hundred yards from the movement's headquarters, and once again around 2,500 delegates attended, this time, noted a second Mass Observation reporter, more middle-class in composition, and largely men and women under 30 years of age. The reason for the meeting was to rally Anglo-Soviet co-operation now that the Soviet Union could once again return to fighting fascism, and, according to the report, 'enthusiasm was immense' [MO File 775 : 10]. A manifesto calling for a 'Second Front' was issued a month later in an edition of 200,000, and a second manifesto in October called for supreme efforts by Britain's working class to help produce goods for the Soviet Union, and 'offensive action' to ease the pressure on the Red Army [*Manifesto*, October 1941 : 1-2; PRITT : 274-275]. A decision to recall a national congress was, however, set aside and by January 1942 the National Committee reached the decision that the organisation should be

suspended indefinitely. By this date the organisation could count only 1,650 active supporters countrywide [Edgar Young papers]. The resolution of the committee, adopted on 3 January 1942 acknowledged that with government support for the Soviet war effort, the main aim of the People's Convention had been met – which was scarcely the case – and supporters were now free to work hard for joint victory as part of the national effort [People's History Museum, CP/ORG/MISC/1/5]. The Convention began with a bang and ended with a whimper.

There is no very precise way of measuring how much support the People's Convention enjoyed during its brief year of activity, or identifying the political allegiance of the delegates that assembled in January and July. The organisers conducted their own statistical survey based on forms that each delegate had to fill in. The results are set out in Table I. The organisers then worked out how many members each delegate or group of delegates 'represented', to arrive at a remarkably precise overall figure of 1,284,413, of which 1,004,953 came from trade union organisations of a variety of kinds. The total of workers included 471 delegates elected directly by the workforce (presumably most of them shop stewards), representing 400,000 workers, and 31 delegates representing 270,000 mineworkers [*The People Speak* : 58-59, 'Delegates Present'].

Table I Delegate Composition at the People's Convention, 12 January 1941

Delegates	Elected from	Representing
471	239 factories and jobs	400,000
87	138 engineering and metal trade unions	67,680
31	26 miners' trade unions	270,000
94	65 building workers' organisations	27,900
153	86 transport ((road and rail unions)	45,450
22	11 unions from the furnishing trade	12,800
95	47 clerical, distributive and administrative unions	52,800
26	20 general workers' unions	4,500
55	55 electrical workers' unions	6,500
75	29 trade union organisations (tailoring, printing, firemen)	24,650
27	20 Trades Councils	92,673
99	89 co-operative organisations	50,000
254	199 political organisations	38,500
17	12 groups of professional workers	460
24	12 colonial organisations	10,000
164	91 youth organisations	20,000
261	131 People's Vigilance Committees	n/a
77	50 tenants' associations and shelter committees	118,000
23	14 housewives' committees	1,500
113	75 cultural, educational and discussion groups	11,000
66	30 miscellaneous organisations	30,000

The degree of representation was certainly exaggerated, since delegates were elected from local, often informal, committees made up of the most politically active workers and outnumbering, as one Home Intelligence report unkindly put it, 'the more moderate and more apathetic majorities' [TNA, INF 1/292]. The number represented by the local People's Vigilance Committees could not be calculated by the organisers,

but it was observed that the South Wales Vigilance Conference claimed to represent 220,000 people [*The People Speak* : 59].

The issue that worried the government was the extent to which the organisation and its supporters were communist, though historians of the movement have had fewer doubts. Weekly intelligence reports for the Ministry of Home Security included the People's Convention first under 'Extremist activities', then under 'Communist activity'. According to one weekly report in December 1940, it was only the communists who promoted the Convention, though the 'vagueness of its aims gains the support of left-wing psychopaths' [TNA, INF 1/292]. The official view was adamantly hostile to a movement regarded as a Soviet stalking horse, and there were calls for the suppression, even internment of those involved. On the day the Convention met, 12 January 1941, Churchill wrote to Herbert Morrison, the Labour minister responsible for home security, asking why communists could not be sent to camps: 'I do not see why if Mosley is confined, subversives and Communists like D.N. Pritt [...] should not equally be confined. The Law and regulations ought to be enforced against those who hamper our war effort, whether from the extreme Right or the extreme Left' [*The Churchill Documents* 16 : 72]. The attitude of the Labour Party was almost as extreme. Members were told in October 1940 that no association with the Convention movement would be tolerated, and witch-hunts to root out communist 'entryism' continued well into 1941. The Labour journal *Tribune*, assuming a communist conspiracy behind the Convention, dubbed it to be 'mischevious, phoney, dishonest, a fraud, a swindle, snare and delusion from start to finish' [CALLAGHAN : 194]. The National Council of Labour distributed to Labour Party and trade union branches a leaflet on 'The Truth about the People's Convention' which claimed that the movement had been founded by prominent communist leaders who had duped what was called 'an Innocents' Club' of fellow travellers to support their strategy of 'revolutionary defeatism' – the term associated with radical left-wing resistance to war in 1914 [*The People's Convention Reply to the National Council of Labour* : 1]. Clement Attlee, the Labour Party leader, went even further in a speech in the South Wales town of Tonypany on 13 February when he accused the 'Communist Party' Convention of assisting Hitler in dividing the nation: 'When Hitler starts to destroy a country from within he buys some traitors, but always manages to find a number of gratuitous asses who become his unconscious tools... All these people are useful to Hitler' [PRITT : 264]. Attlee went on to report that news of the Convention had been published in the German press and broadcast on German radio, an accusation that Denis Pritt, who took up the challenge, was able to demonstrate from a statement by the Ministry of Information, was untrue, but Attlee refused publicly to recant. Pritt insisted, with some justice, that the Convention leaders were all committed anti-fascists [*Another Lie Nailed* : 7-10].

The extent to which the government and Labour Party identified the People's Convention with communism was evident in Morrison's treatment of the *Daily Worker*, which was suppressed together with the Communist *The Week*, nine days after the congress in London under Defence Regulation 2D. The issue was raised at cabinet the day following the Convention assembly, and it is difficult not to see the connection between the two. Morrison hesitated to impose the ban which he had first suggested in December, though he regarded the paper as the mouthpiece of communist circles who sought to frustrate and confuse the war effort by advocating a negotiated peace and a people's government: '“Through chaos to triumph”', he wrote in a memorandum for cabinet, 'might well be the slogan of British Communism as of

German Nazism' [CAB 66/14: 4]. He worried that current public concern with government intervention might provoke a backlash because of the tension between attacking 'subversion' and the accusation that the government used totalitarian methods, but cabinet backed his decision [DONOUGHUE & JONES : 298-299; STAMMERS : 107]. On the same day as the cabinet approved the ban, the *Daily Worker* ran a full double-page spread on the Convention as a historic moment in British politics [*Daily Worker* (13 January 1941) : 1, 4-5, 8]. A week later, on 21 January, the day that the police were ordered to occupy the paper's premises and confiscate the printing equipment, the paper led with a major headline 'Workers mobilise against government threats' thanks to the support of the People's Convention [*Daily Worker* (21 January 1941) : 1]. More worrying for the government was the suggestion that soldiers too were now being induced to participate. Military policemen were posted to prevent soldiers attending a speech by the Communist MP, William Gallacher, a member of the People's Convention National Committee, while two unnamed soldiers present on the podium at the Convention earlier in January won enthusiastic applause. The Convention itself had to be approached more circumspectly, but Morrison's ministry was assured in January by Home Intelligence, based on local police reports following the Convention meeting, of 'the ineffectiveness of Communist activities' [INF 1/292 (15 January 1941)]. There was also the example of wartime France, where communism had been banned and communists interned in primitive and insanitary camps. That this repression had damaged the French war effort was assumed in British government circles, and made Morrison reluctant to go further than a press ban. He was, however, directed by the cabinet to ban further publications and propaganda deemed to be subversive, but the many People's Convention pamphlets and newsheets were left in the end unmolested.

The limits of restriction were illustrated a few weeks later, when apparently at official suggestion, the BBC decided in March 1941 to ban a number of musicians and actors from BBC programmes because they were supporters of the People's Convention. These included the composer Alan Bush, and the actors Michael Redgrave (a Convention sponsor) and Beatrix Lehmann (a member of the National Committee). It was a small issue, but it immediately attracted public attention after the protests against the ban on the *Daily Worker*. When the news of the BBC decision was published in the press on 4 March, there was an immediate reaction from other well-known broadcasters. The composer Ralph Vaughan Williams withdrew a commissioned choral work, returning the fee and a torn-up contract; the novelist E.M. Forster threatened to withdraw from work for the BBC, and the writer Rosamund Lehmann cancelled a broadcast. Letters of protest arrived from, among others, the actor Leslie Howard, the author J.B. Priestley and the cartoonist David Low. The *News Chronicle* deplored 'this arbitrary, illogical and and illiberal censorship' in a country committed to freedom', but other papers pilloried the Convention as a defeatist organisation, seeking a peace with Hitler [BRANSON : 327; STAMMERS : 155; *People's Convention Special* (March 1941) : 1-2]. Michael Redgrave wrote to the National Committee on 6 March dismayed by the accusation of defeatism and received a reply from Harry Adams allowing him to make clear publicly that the Convention was not 'a stop-the-war' movement. 'It is not a movement for a deal with Hitler, or for "peace at any price", Adams continued, 'All the supporters of the People's Convention are irreconcilably opposed to Fascism or to any victory of Fascism' [Letter reproduced in *People's Convention Special* : 4-5]. The issue led to an intervention by 40 MPs who tabled a Commons motion against political discrimination in a state corporation. By the time Churchill answered the motion on 20 March, the BBC had already agreed to reverse the threatened ban. Churchill made it clear that the government would not 'accord the

special facilities of the microphone to persons whose words and actions are calculated to hamper the nation in its struggle for life', but he considered the effort of linking political opinion to musical or dramatic performances 'not apparent or worth establishing' [*Hansard* (20 March 1941)]. The Convention organisers made the most of the opportunity presented by the BBC, but the government step-down reflected a growing popular concern about the challenge to civil liberties exposed in the first months of 1941.

The government obsession with alleged communist conspiracies to subvert the war effort has masked the broader, though brief, appeal that the People's Convention enjoyed among working-class circles and left-wing professionals. All four Convention executive committee members had been Labour Party members until their expulsion. Edgar Young, the vice-chairman, was an anti-war activist, who had helped to run the International Peace Campaign between its foundation in Brussels in 1936 and the decision, which Young opposed, to abandon the campaign in early 1941 [Edgar Young papers, DYO 10/45 (6 February 1941)]. How many of the shop stewards and union organisers who elected delegates to the Convention were Communists is unknown and unknowable, but the scale of support and the wide variety of organisations represented make it evident that they represented a broader section of progressive working-class opinion than the estimated 15,000 current members of the Communist Party [THORPE, 'The Membership': 781]. The publications of the Convention were produced in large numbers intended for a wide audience: 631,930 copies of pamphlets and 1,336,000 leaflets and manifestoes [PHM, CP/ORG/MISC/1/5 (circular letter, 12 January 1941): 1]. Scepticism about the number of 1.2 million represented at the Convention in January 1941 should not overturn the reality that substantial numbers of electors at factory and trade union level identified with the call for a change of government and the protection of working-class interests. The Mass Observation reporter at the Convention was impressed by the absence of what the report called 'the old gang' of the left and the predominance of the skilled working-class. Even *Tribune*, so hostile to the malign intent of the Communist Party, thought the Convention full of 'honest-to-God workers', whose social and political grievances reflected 'the authentic voice of large and growing bodies of opinion'. The *Daily Mirror* also saw support for the Convention in terms of working-class disillusionment with Labour participation in the Churchill coalition: 'They expected Labour ministers in the government to be their champions. They are disappointed in them... So the people feel themselves leaderless' [CALLAGHAN :194; BRANSON : 310].

It is perhaps easy to overlook the extent to which the Labour Party Bournemouth conference in early May 1940, when the Executive decided to join a Churchill government, acted rather like the British equivalent of the German-Soviet Pact. Overnight the Labour Party, strongly critical of the Chamberlain National Government, hostile to the remaining 'men of Munich', and with a long-standing distrust of the fiercely anti-socialist Churchill, became part of the government side-by-side with former political enemies. Disillusionment on the left of the Party, already evident in the late 1930s, was understandable and it was from this constituency that the early moves to creation of the Vigilance Committee were directed. Convention publicity on its origins claimed that 'it developed out of the Labour Party', a claim that was economical with the truth, but not wrong. Workers who now had to adjust to labour conscription under the trade union leader Ernest Bevin and accept the restrictions imposed under the Defence Regulations faced a war effort that appeared loaded against working-class interests. Despite the Trade Union Congress agreement

with the government to avoid strike action, there were 940 stoppages in Britain in 1940, prompting the trade union leader Ernest Bevin, Minister of Labour in the new wartime coalition, to introduce Order 1305 on 19 July 1940, removing the right to strike. There was also the issue of war aims. There was widespread concern, made evident in Home Intelligence reports, over the failure of the government to make clear what its aims were during the war and for the postwar world. The People's Convention, according to Harry Pollitt, appealed to a wide spectrum of those 'who realise the significance of the Government's refusal to state concretely what it is fighting for'. The failure appeared to justify left-wing criticism that the war really was about protecting empire rather than fighting fascism and building a better world. In January 1941, the day before the ban on the *Daily Worker*, the War Cabinet debated the issue of war aims which Churchill's government had refused to articulate. Although there was recognition that the absence of any statement left public opinion dissatisfied, generalities were deemed to be ineffective, while specific proposals 'would be bound to give rise to difficulties'. In the end the cabinet instructed Churchill to tell Parliament that a statement would be forthcoming but not for the foreseeable future' [CAB 65 (20 January 1941)].

It is also evident that the Convention manifesto was not simply a Communist one, except to the extent that Communists obviously shared concerns common to the left in Britain to safeguard labour interests and living standards, preserve democratic liberties, and promote self-determination for the colonies. The Convention did not pursue the formal Communist line, dictated from Moscow, that the war was a conflict of rival imperialisms which Communists should not support, and indeed the Convention movement seems to have attracted little if any attention from Comintern. The Soviet ambassador in London, Ivan Maisky, gave it no mention in his diary.¹ By contrast with the formal Communist Party line, the Convention leadership wanted fascism defeated, but argued that the present government was not adequate to the task given its political outlook and the string of early defeats, whose significance in shaping popular disillusionment is too easily overlooked. It is also the case that the argument for a 'People's Government' or 'People's Front' representing democratic forces in Britain was not new in 1940. Calls for a popular front or people's front went back to the mid-1930s, and they were clearly not the monopoly of the Communist Party, which followed the Comintern line of collaboration with other progressive political forces in a 'popular front' in order to combat fascism [HORNER, *Towards a Popular Front*, 1936].² In 1934, centre-left intellectuals tried to rally support for a progressive bloc committed to saving democracy, but the initiative petered out for lack of any political base [OVERY, *The Morbid Age*: 299-301]. In late 1936, the Conservative MP, Harold Macmillan, launched together with a number of Labour politicians and intellectuals the idea of a 'People's Front' (the name was deliberately designed to avoid imitating the French 'Popular Front', elected in May 1936) which would unite the centre-left in British politics in defence of democratic and liberal values [HORNE, *Macmillan, 1894-1956*: 105; G.D.H. Cole papers, D/5/2/2]. Though this movement was far from being communist, in March 1937 the Labour Party executive began an investigation to see whether those who supported a 'People's Front' should be expelled, to prevent the Communist Party from 'capturing the

¹ On the day of the Convention, 12 January, Maisky wrote at length about an incendiary bomb attack on Kensington Gardens but had no comment on current politics. See GORODETSKY, *The Maisky Diaries*: 328-329.

² On the origins of the 'Popular front' strategy see MYANT, '1935: The Turning Point'.

leadership of the British Labour Movement', an early iteration of the Party's hostile response to the later Convention movement [NEC minutes, 17 and 24 March 1937; BLAAZER : 175-176]. The 'People's Front' again fizzled out because of political differences between the groups that supported it. The residual supporters of the idea called a meeting in October 1937 to establish a 'National Progressive Council' but only sixteen people attended [Layton papers, 1937].

A more significant attempt to construct a popular front materialised in spring 1938, only two years before the launch of People's Vigilance. Throughout late 1937 and 1938 there were regular resolutions from Labour Party members and branches calling for a 'United Front' or 'Peace Alliance' despite the Party ban on any involvement in popular or united fronts. In a number of cities, Councils of Action were established to promote a united front between the Labour Party and other left-wing groups [Noel-Baker papers; Labour Party reports, May 1938]. On 14 February a 'Unity Conference' was organised in Battersea Town Hall, chaired by Dutt, and addressed by Harry Adams, later chairman of the Convention [PRITT : 100]. In May 1938, Labour MPs Stafford Cripps, Ellen Wilkinson and Denis Pritt, appealed to the Labour National Executive to create a 'National Unity' movement together with the Communist Party, the Independent Labour Party, and the Co-operative Party to defend democracy and defeat 'capitalist totalitarianism', a language repeated in later Convention publications. The same month the Labour Party published 'Labour and the Popular Front', rejecting a strategy in which communists 'would be capable of stabbing us in the back at any time.' In July the National Executive rejected unequivocally any contact with the unity movement [*Labour and the Popular Front* : 6; Labour Party memorandum, 5 May 1938 : 3]. Cripps was the leading spokesman on unity and tried to keep a popular front policy going, without including communists. In January 1939, Cripps issued an appeal to all Labour Party members over the heads of the executive to form a progressive bloc by abandoning narrow party interests. He was expelled from the Party on 25 January 1939, while the Executive issued a statement 'Socialism or Surrender: Labour Rejects the Popular Front' [NEC Minutes, 13 January 1939; Noel-Baker papers, Labour Party leaflet, No. 85; Layton papers, 27 March 1939; BLAAZER : 187-189]. Cripps then launched what he called the 'Petition Campaign' in favour of a popular front in Newcastle in February, and by May there were 450 'Petition Committees' with local support from some Labour branches [MATES, 'The North East...': 276-279, 283-286]. The organising secretary of the petition movement was Edgar Young, future vice-chair of the People's Convention, who was also expelled from the Labour Party in March, two months after Cripps [Edgar Young papers, DYO/2/32]. Support for Cripps from inside and outside the Party showed that a constituency favouring some kind of popular or people's front was already in place before the outbreak of war, with or without communism, and it survived to resurface with the call for popular unity against the National Government expressed in summer 1940. Cripps might well have joined Pritt had he not been sent as ambassador to Moscow in June. In a letter to constituents in September 1939 he wrote that his aim was 'to Maximise the drive to get rid of the present Government...with the ultimate hope of breaking the power of capitalism before the war is ended', a view not out of place in the future Convention. He organised a meeting with Pritt and Hewlett Johnson in early 1940 to discuss creating a real opposition for which he claimed to have drawn up plans, but nothing materialised before he left for Moscow [GORODETSKY, *Cripps* : 2; PRITT, *Autobiography* : 235].

Like the earlier unity appeals, the demand for a 'People's Government' in 1940-41 lacked political realism. Indeed, the Convention can be seen as the end point of a brief six-year period of 'popular frontism', rather than a movement of the future. Although the Convention talked about a government that was more representative of the common people, rather than a ruling class regime, there was little written about how it might be achieved in a parliamentary system with a duly elected House of Commons. Before the Convention met, Pritt wrote a pamphlet on *Forward to a People's Government* to flesh out the movement's principal commitment but it contained no practical strategy for changing the government except to suggest that working-class organisations 'have a magnificent record of solidarity and determination' which would allow them to take 'decisive action' to establish a 'People's Government' [PRITT, *Forward to a People's Government* : 14]. This had revolutionary implications, although the movement in general eschewed any revolutionary language. In February 1941, Harry Pollitt, still out in the cold in the Communist Party, wrote about the People's Government in *Labour Monthly* in terms that were more obviously insurrectionary:

The demand for a new Government will take an irresistible character, the mass movement demanding and organising to secure a new form of Government – a People's Government – will grow stronger and stronger, and lead to new forms of political crisis, where the masses will find the means of securing this People's Government. [*Labour Monthly* 23/2 (February 1941) : 63]

The main Convention publications, however, used the concept of a 'People's Government' as a stick with which to beat the existing regime, with a remarkable absence of any political strategy to achieve it, revolutionary or otherwise.¹

Much the same could be said of the demand for a 'People's Peace', which was intimately linked to the call for a popular government, and an equally unreal aspiration. The Convention movement was not formally pacifist, nor could it afford to be opposed to the current war, but at the same time the demand for peace reflected a longer anti-war movement in the 1930s, in Britain and elsewhere, in which popular initiative between peoples was expected to overcome the menace of war. The chief spokesman of the Convention on peace was Edgar Young, who had helped to establish the British branch of an international peace organisation, the *Rassemblement universel de la paix*, founded in Brussels at a vast anti-war congress in September 1936. The conclusion of the Congress organisers was that 'humanity, in its immense majority, rejects with horror the idea of a fatal war' [Edgar Young papers, DYO 10/26]. The British branch was known as the International Peace Campaign, and was chaired by the president of the British League of Nations Union, Lord Cecil, and run by the Labour politician, Philip Noel-Baker. The new movement argued for unity among those opposed to war, apparently inspired, to an extent that worried British anti-war campaigners, by the communist desire for popular front initiatives. The left-wing character of the new movement created tensions with the League of Nations Union, to which it was united at Cecil's insistence, while the IPC lacked unity with any of the other pacifist or anti-war organisations [OVERY, *Morbid Age* : 257-261]. Edgar Young was among those who thought that war could only be averted and peace saved through collaboration with the Soviet Union, and when that failed and war broke out, Young was one of a minority on the IPC National Committee who condemned the war and wanted to keep alive the idea that the people would act to save peace [Edgar Young papers, DYO 10/39-44]. He was an original sponsor of the People's Vigilance Committee, along with the Rev Stanley Evans, who worked with him on the

¹ For example ADAMS, *Why Britain Needs a People's Government* (December 1940).

International Peace Campaign National Committee. He authored the Convention pamphlet on a people's peace in which he elaborated views that stretched back to the early discussion of popular participation to achieve peace expressed by the *Rassemblement*.

The 'People's Peace' was as fanciful an aim as a 'People's Government'. Indeed a peace was only possible, in Young's view, once a people's government was in power. The object was not to seek a peace with Hitler on any account, but to use the people's government to advertise to the enemy peoples the idea that they should throw off their fascist ruling class and embrace a peace without annexations or penalties, in which every people would be free to determine their own future. Young suggested, as the IPC had argued in 1938, that Soviet involvement was essential because here was a people's government able to assist in persuading other peoples that they could take their future into their own hands, even those under German occupation, even in Germany itself. The argument mirrored the situation in the early stages of the First World War, when radical socialists hoped that international socialist solidarity between the working class in every warring state would make it impossible for the war to continue. In Convention writing, however, there is no historical reflection on the failure of international collaboration in the earlier conflict, or of the stark implausibility of a peace created through the initiative of the common people. As Pritt wrote late in 1940:

Is it not almost certain that such action on the part of the working people of Britain, and the prospect of such a peace, would at once release all the pent-up hatred for the ruling class of Germany...? Is it not almost certain that the coming to power of a People's Government in Britain would be the signal for decisive action by the French, Austrian, Czech, and other workers to throw off their oppressors? [*Forward to a People's Government* : 12-13]

Deluded as such views now appear, the idea that a peace might be brokered very different from the Versailles Settlement clearly appealed to the cross-section of working-class organisations represented at the Convention, where, according to the Mass Observer, 'Peace and all the accessories of peace definitely formed the main theme both in the meeting and in the lobby conversations' [MO File 54 3/1 : 1-2]. A progressive peace settlement was a mainstream concern, not least because there were few clues from the Churchill government about how they viewed the future.

The other area of clear continuity with the 1930s was the decision by the People's Vigilance Committee to include as a manifesto point in September, when urban bombing began, of 'adequate air-raid precautions, deep bomb-proof shelters, rehousing and relief of victims' [*Why Britain Needs a People's Government* : 2]. The issue of effective air-raid precautions became politicised in the last years of preparation for a possible bombing campaign before the outbreak of war. Government policy on the provision of shelters was governed by reluctance to bear the substantial cost of constructing protection for the entire vulnerable population, but also by a belief that bomb-proof shelters would encourage a 'shelter mentality' that would discourage workers from returning to work. Sir Alexander Rouse, chief technical adviser to the Home Office on air-raid precautions claimed in March 1939 that if bomb-proof shelters were provided for the population 'they are going to go underground. They go underground and the war is won – but not by us. We cannot expect, as civilians, to have more protection than our soldiers and sailors' [HALDANE, 'A.R.P. and a People's Government' : 23]. The policy was opposed by a diverse group of scientists and

architects, including the Marxist geneticist J.B.S. Haldane, whose strident championship of deep 'Haldane' shelters was used to mobilise popular protest against the failure to provide effective security against bombing in predominantly working-class areas [MEISEL, 'Air Raid Shelter Policy' : 308-311]. The emigré architect, Berthold Lubetkin, was another champion of deep shelters. His firm, Tecton, designed a comprehensive programme of deep shelters for the London Borough of Finsbury in early 1939, but when the programme was submitted to the Home Office for approval, it was turned down on the grounds, among others, that providing deep shelters would divert national effort from more urgent defence tasks [MEISEL : 311-314]. Both the Communist Party and, significantly, the Labour Party took up the political challenge. In November 1938, the London Labour Party published *London Undefended: A Record of Shameful Government Neglect*, which claimed that government failure to provide effective air-raid protection for the working-class was 'treachery to the nation' [*London Undefended!* : 6]. In late 1938 an A.R.P. Co-ordinating Committee was established under Haldane's chairmanship, including architects, engineers and politicians – among them Herbert Morrison, the later Minister of Home Security. The committee led the agitation over the following two years for adequate shelter, but was banned in 1940 by the Labour Party Executive as a 'subversive' organisation, with Morrison in the lead against what he now claimed was Communist-inspired agitation [BRANSON : 301-302].

Under these circumstances, Haldane was an obvious recruit for the People's Convention. He was an initial sponsor, and in January 1941 a member of the National Committee, and almost certainly the driving force behind the movement's decision to highlight the shelter crisis. In the late autumn, People's Vigilance began collecting signatures in shelters for a petition to the government but thousands of posters and pamphlets condemning shelter provision were seized by the police [ADDISON & CRANG, *Listening to Britain* : 435]. The ARP Co-ordinating Committee lobbied Morrison to change policy on providing shelter, but the shelter campaign soon developed its own momentum at local level, since the trench shelters and surface brick shelters provided in many working-class districts were quite inadequate protection [Haldane papers, 4/3/2/15]. The government scientist, Solly Zuckerman, later calculated that over 50 per cent of the urban population had no access to a shelter and ran their luck at home [Zuckerman Archive, OEMU/59/13].¹ In London's East End, the principal target in the first months of the Blitz, local councils tried to persuade the government to let them develop deep shelters, but schemes developed by Islington and West Ham were rejected by the Home Office [IDLE, *War over West Ham* : 70-71; TNA, HO 207/644]. On 14 September 1940, the Stepney Communist and future MP, Phil Piratin, led 70 protestors to the Savoy Hotel in London's Strand and occupied the plush shelters deep beneath the building, where they refused police efforts to get them to leave until they were ready [PIRATIN : 73-74].

Whether the People's Convention made a difference to government policy is difficult to judge, and since Morrison for one regarded shelter committees and organised protest as yet another form of communist subversion, the impact of the Convention on this issue may have been negative. In October 1940, he claimed that demands for deep shelters were politically motivated: 'It is sometimes done in a way that means Fifth Column in effect, and I am not sure it is not Fifth Column in intention' [ADAMS citing

¹ His survey of sheltering during the Blitz showed that 51 per cent did not shelter in dedicated shelters, and only eight per cent sheltered in public shelters.

the *Daily Herald* for 11 October 1940 : 14]. But since there were many non-communist voices warning of poor conditions and the danger to home morale, including the prime minister's wife, Clementine Churchill, who toured shelters to see conditions for herself, the People's Convention was not out of step with wider opinion. The claim that working-class districts had been in general poorly supplied with shelter support was vindicated in the high casualties suffered in areas of dense, poorly constructed housing [OVERY, *The Bombing War* : 145-150].

The final strand of continuity between the People's Convention and the movements of the 1930s was the popular attitude to the Soviet Union. Friendship with the Soviet Union was a major plank in the Convention platform, and one that eventually, thanks to Hitler's invasion on 22 June 1941, led to concrete results. It is easy to argue that Communist Party support for the Convention was an expedient way to try to reverse the public hostility to the Soviet Union over the German-Soviet Pact, the invasion of Finland and the occupation of the Baltic States. But this would be to overlook the popular image of the Soviet Union in the 1930s among left-wing and progressive circles that were not Communist, even if they have often been dismissed by the imprecise and pejorative term 'fellow traveller'. This Cold War construct obscures the wide range of avenues of approach to assessment of the Soviet Union in the 1930s. Socialists of all shades were bound to respond to the apparent evidence of social and economic progress under Stalin, and if they often did so uncritically, it was in order to highlight what were deemed to be the defects of free-enterprise capitalism and ruling-class power. When the British Institute of Public Opinion ran a survey in January 1939 on the question 'If you HAD to choose between Fascism and Communism which would you choose?', 63 per cent opted for Communism, though few, if any, would have been Communists ['What Britain Thinks' : 19-20]. There was a healthy appetite for information on the Soviet Union and public lectures, art displays, and concerts highlighted Soviet achievements. The Society for Cultural Relations with the U.S.S.R., founded in 1924, counted among its sponsors John Maynard Keynes, Norman Angell, Aldous Huxley, H.G. Wells, Virginia Woolf, Bertrand Russell, and a handful of peers and knights [Gollancz papers, MSS 157/3/RU/14]. In 1935 a Committee for Peace and Friendship with the USSR was established in London under the chairmanship of the Labour peer, the Earl of Listowel, whose prominent, but non-Communist supporters, included Ralph Vaughan Williams, George Bernard Shaw, Vera Brittain, and the economist J.A. Hobson [Gollancz papers, MSS 157/3/RU/9&10]. A stream of equally distinguished visitors went to the Soviet Union during the 1930s, and returned in most, though not all cases, impressed by what they had seen. Best known were Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Fabian Socialists whose book *Soviet Communism : A New Civilisation* sold tens of thousands of copies and received widespread publicity [OVERY, *Morbid Age* : 294-295].

By the time the People's Convention had made 'friendship with the Soviet Union' point (6) of the programme, there lay behind a decade or more of enthusiasm in Britain for the Soviet experiment that embraced many beyond the Communist Party. Pritt, Edgar Young and Harry Adams had all visited the Soviet Union in the 1930s and returned impressed by what they saw. The difficulty in 1940 was to overcome public disillusionment and hostility to Stalin's pact with Hitler and territorial expansion in Eastern Europe. Pritt was at the forefront of circles in 1939 and 1940 trying to demonstrate that the Pact was a necessity after the failure of Britain and France to reach a collective agreement, and to support the security needs of the Soviet Union that made necessary the conflict with Finland. The publication of Pritt's Penguin

Special, *Must the War Spread?* in January 1940, in which he justified Soviet action, led to his expulsion from the Labour Party and prompted Allen Lane, the publisher, to cancel Pritt's next book while it was in press shortly before the Convention met in January 1941 [PRITT, *Autobiography* : 258-259]. Pritt and the Convention stayed loyal to the idea that only friendship with the Soviet Union rather than the wide talk of possible war against it, current in the spring of 1940, would make it possible to achieve the 'People's Peace'. Harry Adams found that point (6) always aroused the most enthusiasm in Vigilance and Convention meetings 'among audiences whose political views on many other matters differed very widely' [ADAMS, *The People's Convention Fights for British-Soviet Unity* : 7]. When Gallup Polls asked a survey audience in March 1940 'Would you like to see our government establish friendly relations with Russia?' there were still 41 per cent in favour of the proposition, the month that Finland was forced to accept an armistice; a further survey in April 1941 had 70 per cent in favour, and only 13 per cent against [GALLUP : 16, 44]. Despite persistent press and government hostility to the Soviet Union, a substantial residue of the earlier positive view remained, sustained, among other sources, by the People's Convention.

The German invasion of the Soviet Union transformed British attitudes, both at government and popular level. The Convention was able to make the most of its long support for closer friendship, and began at once to promote the idea that unity in the fight against fascism meant support for the Churchill government, and for maximum war production, in this case a clear identity with the overnight switch in the Communist Party line dictated from Moscow (though it is worth recalling that the 'party line' of the Churchill government switched just as rapidly the day the German-Soviet war broke out). The agreement signed in Moscow on 12 July 1941 by Stafford Cripps and Vyachslav Molotov for mutual assistance and no separate peace prompted one of the last of the Convention's publications, Pritt's *Together against Hitler* in August 1941, which reproduced the National Committee's statement of 26 July summoning the movement's supporters to make the Anglo-Soviet alliance a reality by pressing the government to honour its pledge. Pritt now argued that together with the Soviet Union 'an honest and trustworthy peace', a 'people's peace' in effect, was a possibility at last [PRITT, *Together against Hitler*; PRITT, *Autobiography* : 272]. The Convention began to agitate for offensive action, soon for a Second Front. But the changed circumstances made the movement less necessary and support soon waned. Pritt and other Convention workers threw support behind the movement for British-Soviet Committees to raise money for the Soviet war effort, promote news of the Soviet armed forces, and create a culture of friendly relations. In February 1942, a National Council of British-Soviet Committees was established a month after the Convention suspended activity [*British-Soviet Committees* : 5].

Even at this point, the Labour Party could not abandon its deep dislike and distrust of Communism, although many of the committees were run with local Conservative support and participation, representing in political and social terms a broad if temporary pro-Soviet front. Transport House organised its own 'Aid-to-Russia Fund' and the National Executive announced in July that 'no association with the Communist Party was possible', despite the changed wartime circumstances and the unmistakable evidence that sympathy for the Soviet Union was non-partisan. Labour supporters were sent guidelines directing them not to appear on any platform where there might be communist involvement, but this proved almost impossible to enforce [BRANSON : 13-15]. Ironically when the Labour intellectual Harold Laski, a severe critic of the Convention, proposed in spring 1942 a strategy for unifying the international

labour movement, Comintern advised the British Communist Party to refuse 'any obligations towards the Labour Party' [Alexander Dimitrov to Stalin and Molotov, 5 May 1942. DALLIN & FIRSOV : 193-194].

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The People's Convention was not, on the evidence presented here, simply a Communist stalking horse as almost all of the literature implies.¹ Its immediate appeal did reflect genuine grievances, and disillusionment with the sudden switch of Labour to support of the despised National Government, while the organisation was run by men only recently expelled as members of the Labour Party. The background of the 1930s, the age of 'causes' that flared up, flourished briefly, and fizzled out, whether peace initiatives, popular fronts or unity movements, provides a sounder historical context for what happened in 1940 and 1941 than the wartime history of British Communism. Apart from the alarm the Convention raised among the Government, not least its Labour members who were much more inclined to suppress non-Labour socialism and engage in heresy hunts in the Party, the Convention was able to organise and distribute literature without the same regular police intervention suffered by known communists, whose houses could be searched without warrant, papers and records seized, employers notified so that the offending worker could be sacked, and placed under threat not to attend any further meetings [BRANSON : 294-297]. Indeed the level of police intervention and surveillance may well have discouraged communists and communist sympathisers from participating too fully in the Convention. Communist Party membership languished over the whole period of the movement at around 15-20,000. The Convention itself was protected from serious intervention by the failure to secure a real mass base of support and the difficulty of defining it legally as subversive. Government intelligence reports regularly reported how limited radical ('extremist') participation was, and therefore how ineffective, while the head of Home Intelligence, Mary Adams, argued that in her view criticism of the government did not amount to subversion [HINTON : 154]. For all the rhetoric of people's action, a combination of wartime conditions, the crisis caused by the Blitz, fear of official reprisals and concern that the movement might be too clearly communist, almost certainly kept a broader constituency from emerging. Nor was the commitment to People's Government and People's Peace a plausible call to action, any more than they had been in the 1930s. The People's Convention was nevertheless for the eighteen months of its activity from July 1940 to January 1942 a reminder that wartime consensus was both fragile and challengeable, a more democratic reality than the Convention's own fears of growing totalitarianism allowed.

¹ 'The convention's programme was essentially that of the CPGB' : THORPE, *British Communist Party* : 264.