



Arthur Ponsonby (1871-1946)

“The House of Commons has treated those of us who are protesting to-day with the greatest patience, but it is right that those of us who hold these views should express them. It is by this House of Commons that the decision must be taken, and however small a minority we may be... I think in the country we have a very large body of opinion with us.”¹

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¹ 3 August 1914, Hansard vol. 65, cc1841-42

Arthur Ponsonby was one of the few MPs² who openly opposed Britain's involvement in the First World War. On 3 August 1914, as the House of Commons debated tensions in Europe, Ponsonby affirmed his position:

"The balance of power is responsible for this—this mad desire to keep up an impossibility in Europe, to try and divide the two sections of Europe into an armed camp, glaring at one another with suspicion and hostility and hatred...and bleeding the people to pay for the armaments"

*"I trust that, even though it may be late, the Foreign Secretary will use every endeavour to the very last moment...to keep this country in a state of peace."*³

Arthur Ponsonby had formed a reputation in the preceding years as an anti-establishment figure. His publication *The Camel and the Needle's Eye* (1910) criticised high society and the power of the aristocracy. Contrary to his upbringing, having been born in Windsor Castle (his father was Queen Victoria's principal private secretary), he went on to become a leading pacifist and socialist. He was elected as a Liberal member for Stirling burghs in 1908, a seat he held until 1918.

Ponsonby was a founding member of the Union of Democratic Control (UDC) in 1914⁴, leading a group of MPs and sympathisers in attempting a peaceful resolution to the conflict. The group was under no illusions about their minority status and Ponsonby spoke in the Commons about the 'war fever' gripping the nation:

"I saw it last night when I walked through the streets. I saw bands of half-drunken youths waving flags, and I saw a group outside a great club in St. James's Street being encouraged by members of the club from the balcony... and that is what is called patriotism"

Anti-German feeling spilled over into all walks of life⁵ and following the decision to enter the war, Ponsonby attempted to take a pragmatic approach to matters. In fact, he voted in favour of the £100 million Vote of Credit to finance the war effort, "in this great crisis it is incumbent on us to do all we can, not only to help those of our fellow countrymen who have gone to the Front, but also to see that suffering at home...is relieved as far as possible."⁶

By 1915 and '16 the UDC launched an extensive pamphlet campaign and held regular meetings to campaign against the war. The press had also escalated their criticisms of the organisation, tarnishing the UDC as 'pro-German'. The most vocal opponent was the *Daily Express* led by Sir Max Aitken (later Lord Beaverbrook), who started to list upcoming UDC meetings to disrupt. Ponsonby was physically attacked on consecutive days in July 1915 as he attended meetings in London and Leicester. Police raids on UDC offices were to follow and their literature was subject to an export ban. However, no prosecutions were ever made though under the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA).

² Only five MPs spoke against the war in the debate on 3 August, 1914

³ 3 August 1914, Hansard vol. 65, cc1841-42

⁴ The key founding members included E.D. Morel, Charles Trevelyan MP, Ramsey MacDonald MP and Norman Angell

⁵ The Royals changed their name from Saxe-Coburg-Gotha to Windsor and even Dachshunds were longer seen on the streets

⁶ Hansard V, vol 65, 2089-90

Undeterred, Ponsonby produced a publication, *'First Class Lies'* (1917), in which he highlighted inaccuracies in press articles compared to the reality on the front line. He also formed increasingly strong links with the Independent Labour Party to affiliate the organisation with trade union bodies throughout the UK.⁷

As the war neared its end in 1918, Ponsonby managed to secure a meeting with Prime Minister Lloyd George in an attempt to secure a negotiated peace before Germany surrendered. Unfortunately the meeting did not quite go to plan with Ponsonby stating afterwards, "Lloyd George cannot wage war, he cannot make peace, therefore he must be turned out...people themselves must realise their strength and take the matter into their own hands."⁸

By November 1918 the people were having their say. Ponsonby lost his seat (standing as an Independent Democrat) as did all the MPs who were involved in the UDC campaign. However, Ponsonby and those involved in the UDC were to have a far reaching legacy.⁹ Ponsonby was elected to Parliament in 1922 as a Labour Party candidate, as were 30 other members of the UDC including Ramsey McDonald who became Prime Minister in 1924.

UDC members' influence on foreign policy was thus to last throughout the inter-war period with 15 Labour ministers of the 1924 government involved in the group.¹⁰ Ponsonby was appointed a Minister in the Foreign Office and established the 'Ponsonby rule' in that all treaties had to be laid before the Commons for 21 days before approval. His impact in changing perspectives and the rationale behind WW1 were highlighted in his book *Falsehood in Wartime* (1928). He was especially incensed by the Government's control and manipulation of information:

*"With eavesdroppers, letter-openers, decipherers, telephone tappers, spies, an intercept department, a forgery department, a criminal investigation department, a propaganda department, an intelligence department, a censorship department, a ministry of information, a Pressbureau, etc., the various Governments were well equipped to "instruct" their peoples."*¹¹

Ponsonby was elevated to the House of Lords in 1931 and became Leader of the House of Lords. He continued his anti-war efforts right up until 1939 with the hope that Britain could avoid another 'Great War'.

⁷ By June 1918 the UDC was affiliated to 174 Labour bodies which had a total membership of more than half a million, *The Union of Democratic Control in British Politics during the First World War*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1971, p. 206

⁸ Ponsonby, 'What Next?', U.D.C, May 1918

⁹ See pp. 217-222, *The Union of Democratic Control in British Politics during the First World War*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1971

¹⁰ This included Margaret Bondfield the first female cabinet Minister

¹¹ P.2, *Falsehood in War-time*, Arthur Ponsonby MP,

<http://www.vlib.us/wwi/resources/archives/texts/t050824i/ponsonby.pdf>