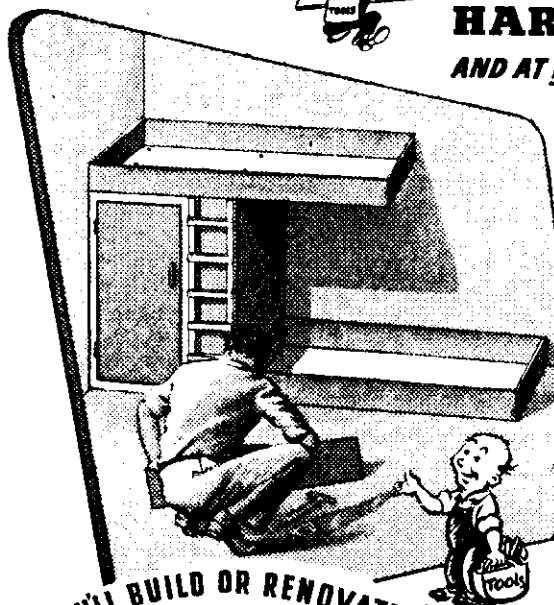


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## Voices Through the Curtain

IT was not to be expected that the Question Mark panel which recently discussed the atomic dilemma would produce a solution. All that could be done by good speakers was to bring the dilemma more sharply into focus. Perhaps the most interesting point which came up in the discussion was the need for a clear expression of opinion by the common people. Professor M. L. E. Oliphant was sure that people everywhere, if they could be consulted, would declare themselves in favour of the international control of atomic weapons. As in his earlier speech to the Science Congress, he visualised "some form of central world government" with powers "limited to the prevention of war" and so on, "but above all things possessing the only armies, the only organs of police for the preservation of law and order." Mr. E. V. Dumbleton, however, pointed out that the international authority would then be the strongest power in the world. "If the controllers are corrupted by power, we would have no idea of the consequences."

This was a practical objection with which many of us must be in agreement. But does it rule out the possibility of a world-wide expression of opinion? The first and obvious difficulty is that hundreds of millions of people are not free to say what they think. One part of the dilemma is simply the curtain of silence which stands between the democracies and the authoritarian states. In western countries the subject can be argued to its final implications, and there is little doubt that this general debate will influence political thinking. But how far can it influence the rulers of countries where the free movement of opinion is not permitted? That seems to be the heart of the matter. If millions of Russians were asked to vote on atomic control, they would not suddenly put aside attitudes which have been formed by education and party

discipline. They would expect to be told what to do by their political leaders. Chinese peasants and workers who are not used to being consulted on national affairs, could scarcely be asked to express opinions on the biggest issue which mankind has ever faced.

These people and others like them must be reached through their leaders; and this seems to mean that the point of contact is where it has always been—in the conference rooms of United Nations. It may be difficult, looking back over a long series of unsuccessful meetings, to find reasons for optimism. But the Soviet rulers are not fools; and whatever the state of public knowledge may be, we can be sure that the men at the top are fully informed on world opinion. They, too, are afraid of the bomb. Although they may continue to make hard bargains, and to win what advantage they can from the general unrest, they should be credited with some insight into a new situation. The limits of safety have been brought closer. Within those limits, the ministers and delegates must try as before to reach agreement.

They will not be indifferent to the movements of opinion around them, and these may be wider than now seems possible. The world cannot really be divided into sealed compartments. Ideas are powerful, and will find their way across the frontiers. Even now, perhaps, the west is not entirely excluded from the east. India, whose statesmen are working patiently for peace, is a bridge into Asia. The common people cannot speak everywhere with a single voice; and if they speak plainly when they are free to do so, they must not expect a new purpose or message to run like a flame around the world. But they will be helping to strengthen the hands of those who are down in the arena. There are times when it is almost immoral to be silent.

N.Z. LISTENER, JUNE 25, 1954.