

LARGE ATTENDANCE AT WAR DEBATE.

Over 180 braved the rain and cold on November 20th to debate the motion "**There can be no just war**". at South Farnham School. The debate was organised by Farnham Humanists and their chairman, Dr David Savage, announced this as the third in a series of annual debates presented by Farnham Humanists on topical questions. The debates have attracted large numbers and eminent principal speakers; none more eminent than that evening's line up of Bruce Kent the well known peace campaigner, supported by Albert Beale who describes himself in the oxymoron of a "militant pacifist". The opposition to the motion was no less robust with Field Marshall the Lord Bramall, former chief of defence staff supported by Professor Richard Norman. To keep these formidable forces in order required a chairman of fortitude, a task more than adequately discharged by Dame Elizabeth Anson.

The debate addressed what is meant by "just" and indeed, what is meant by "war". Lord Bramall pointed out that "just" is a subjective value. Bruce Kent decried the misuse of "war" in such expressions as "war on crime". All accepted war as horrible and to be avoided where possible. The "where possible" term was the nub of the argument. St. Thomas Aquinas was quoted in his laying down the traditional criteria for going to war. Amongst those are that a proper authority should decide and nowadays that is taken to be the U.N: then war should be the last resort. War should also be proportionate. Lord Bramall added that there are some things in life worth fighting for, a sentiment hard to deny. Bruce Kent considered society never goes far enough to find a peaceful solution but this is now much more important as modern weaponry is often not controllable. Albert Beale maintained that justice needs a process but that war has no sense of process. Winners of wars are the better armed, not the most moral.

The accepted criteria were measured against actual wars that have occurred. The 1914 war was generally thought to have been a catastrophe that should have been avoided, even Lord Bramall attributed it to power politics. Bruce Kent and Albert Beale drew attention to the cyclic phenomenon of wars - one leads to another - The 1919 Treaty of Versailles being a clear example. Professor Norman had marched against some wars but was not a pacifist. He claimed that the Aquinas criteria had not been met in nearly all recent wars - The Iraq war without UN say-so, (absence of authority) the Falklands war started whilst negotiations were still probable (not last resort) and the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs dropped whilst Japan was suing for peace. (not proportionate). On the other hand, the second world war had a just outcome as it had broken a cycle of violence.

The high level of debate was maintained by speakers from the floor. The "authority" of the UN Security Council was questioned as being too political at present. Iraq was thought to be the wrong war - 'just' or not. Attack on civilians is terrorism - co-lateral damage cannot be defended.

Dame Elizabeth closed the debate and put the motion to a vote. It was carried narrowly by a majority of four (out of 180!) with a large number, twenty-one, abstaining. Admission to the meeting was free but a collection for the Darfur appeal at exit raised £631 -an impressive figure. All in all it was a robust but well ordered debate with the opposing views

evenly balanced. Farnham Humanists will certainly be mounting another debate next autumn.