

## Will 'wartime spirit' fight AIDS epidemic?

by Mark Burdman

As the full dimensions of the AIDS crisis begin to emerge in Britain, an increasing number of influentials have come forward, to liken the effort that Britain will need to defeat AIDS to the mobilizations that Britons made in world wars in this century. AIDS is increasingly being seen as a matter of war, a war for the nation's survival.

In a statement to the weekly *The Observer* on Nov. 9, Prof. Avrion Mitcheson of the University College, London, Department of Zoology and Cell Biology, declared: "AIDS is going to kill as many people as were slain during the Second World War. We should therefore treat it with the same seriousness and discuss it now at a summit conference."

On Nov. 11, on the same day that the newly constituted cabinet committee on AIDS would be having its first meeting, the *Times* of London editorialized: "From voluntary recruitment in the First World War to the mass screening for tuberculosis and other chest diseases since 1945, British governments have considerable experience of mobilizing popular consent and participation." The *Times* called for, as a *minimum* program, a government-sponsored "major program of voluntary AIDS screening," as a step toward general, compulsory screening, and dismissed objections to such measures as "trivial in relation to the threat of a major AIDS epidemic."

The increasingly military emphasis of the fight against AIDS in Britain was reinforced by the Nov. 8 announcement, that Defense Secretary George Younger would be joining the cabinet committee on AIDS, which is headed by Lord Whitelaw. The next day's *Sunday Telegraph* reported this front-page, and noted that there was "growing fear" that the spread of AIDS could "soon affect the armed forces" and undermine their "efficiency."

As to the popular mood, three polls—by the "This Week" television show, by *The Observer*, and by the weekly *The People*—are showing results of between 66% and 80% in favor of national screening for AIDS. One question in *The People's* poll was, "Should AIDS be treated as a national emergency with explicit publicity on TV and in the press?" In response, 83% said, "Yes." The tabloid reported its results under banner headlines, "AIDS Tests for All," "Something Similar to a Wartime Spirit."

Against this backdrop, the cabinet AIDS Committee's

decisions, taken on Nov. 11, are disappointing. Only £5 million (about \$3.6 million) was allocated for the fight against AIDS, all of it directed at "public education," particularly in the form of a government-authored pamphlet to be sent to 23 million households. The content of the message, primarily, is the avoidance of "promiscuous sex," use of condoms, and the like. No decision was taken on national screening, on making AIDS reportable, and so on.

This decision, however, is not the last word. For one thing, it had already been announced on Nov. 6, that the Parliament's Social Services Select Committee has decided to hold an emergency parliamentary investigation into the AIDS crisis, which will feature five weeks of oral testimony from AIDS experts, beginning in January 1987. According to the *Times* of London Nov. 7, the Committee's inquiry "is to examine the most unpalatable options for containing the disease. These include screening visitors from AIDS-affected countries, the strict physical isolation of AIDS victims and carriers, making AIDS a notifiable disease, and issuing cards to AIDS carriers."

The Department of Health followed the parliamentary Committee's announcement with its own statement that it would "urgently" convene a conference of AIDS experts, possibly before the end of 1986.

Another key factor is that early elections are now likely some time between June and October of next year. Best estimates are that Mrs. Thatcher's Conservatives will be making AIDS a key issue, hitting at the Labour Party for expediting the spread of AIDS by politically coddling the "high-risk" groups. The Tories cannot afford to allow the Opposition to gain momentum on this issue, as happened after the Nov. 11 cabinet decision, when Labour Party "Shadow Health Secretary" Michael Meacher attacked the allotted monies for AIDS as "footling and paltry," and other Labour spokesmen charged that the £5 million allotment was only a "cosmetic gesture."

Within the pro-Tory milieu, the Thatcher-loyalist *Daily Express* sounded the message, with an editorial attacking the cabinet committee for having produced a "pathetic mouse" and having made a decision that could have been taken by a "couple of lower-grade civil servants."

The final determinant, however, will be the spread of AIDS itself and the popular reaction to that. As the ripples of panic in Britain are turning into a tidal wave, the *Times* put it this way: "If AIDS ever does reach epidemic proportions, public opinion will very quickly force Whitehall to abandon reservations" about very tough measures, such as screening.

After the cabinet decision, the *Times* of Nov. 12 reported that, nonetheless, "some senior members of the committee are hoping that a national effort, evoking something similar to a wartime spirit, can be mobilized to conquer the disease. Some feel that measures which at present seem unpalatable, such as screening, may become less so as the virus spreads."