

Court for census boycotter

AN EIGHTY-TWO-YEAR-OLD QUAKER is ready to go to prison over his boycott of the census. John Voysey, of Ludlow Meeting, has said he will refuse to pay a fine if found guilty. He will face magistrates on 1 February.

A boycott campaign began after the government awarded the contract for running last year's census in England and Wales to a division of the multinational arms company Lockheed Martin. A similar campaign was launched in Scotland and Northern Ireland, where the census was run by arms firm CACI.

John declared himself a conscientious objector when he was conscripted to the armed forces in 1947. 'I remain a conscientious objector', he explained. He told *the Friend* that if he paid the fine he would 'become an accessory' to the actions of the arms industry.

Failure to complete the census, which takes place every ten years, is technically a criminal offence. Critics point out that thousands of people routinely ignore the census without facing prosecution. What makes things different this time is that many boycotters returned their

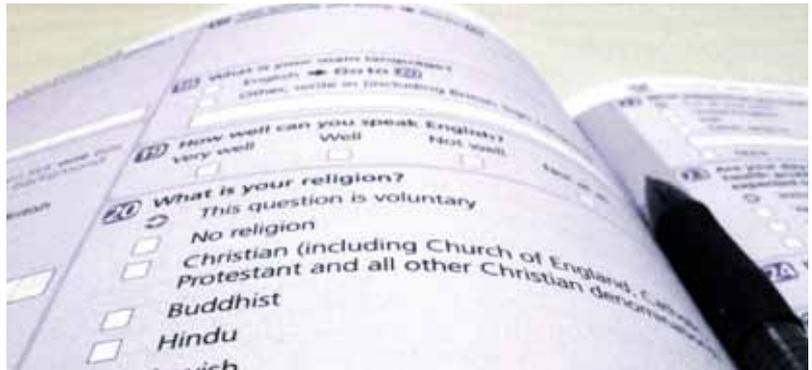


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blank census forms with letters of objection. This makes prosecution easier.

At least five boycotters have already pled not guilty at initial hearings in Wrexham, Liverpool and Reading (see 'Census boycotters in court', 25 November 2011). The first trial is expected on 17 January in Liverpool. While a number of Quakers participated in the boycott, John is thought to be the first to face court.

It remains unclear whether the authorities plan to prosecute all boycotters or whether they are picking out a few at random. John and his wife Anne refused to complete the census form for the house that they share, but only

John has been charged. He suspects that the authorities see him as 'the head of the household', which he regards as 'a very sexist approach'.

John is surprised to have been summoned to appear at Wrexham Magistrates' Court despite living in Hereford. He said: 'The whole basis of British justice is that you're tried locally by your peers'. He objects to being tried 'in a foreign country'.

John Voysey is not the only Quaker in his age group to be taken to court in recent months. John Lynes, an eighty-three-year-old of St Leonards-on-Sea Meeting, was charged with criminal damage in November after protesting against the war in Afghanistan at the gates of Downing Street.

Ministers 'massaging' aid money

MINISTERS HAVE BEEN ACCUSED of using 'made-up money' to meet their overseas aid targets. They plan to cancel a debt owed by Sudan and have said the money involved will be counted as aid.

The Department for International Development made the admission in an email to Jubilee Debt Campaign. The campaigners say the debt is based on (apparently arbitrary) interest rates and was not expected to be repaid.

The government is committed to spending 0.7 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) on aid. Jubilee Debt Campaign have calculated that cancellation of Sudan's debt could account for seven per cent of this

figure. While the previous government counted debt cancellation as aid, this appears to be the first time it has been counted towards aid targets.

Sudan's current debt of £678 million is based on annual interest rates of ten to twelve per cent since the country defaulted on its debt in 1984. The debt was then only £173 million.

'Debt cancellation would cost the UK government nothing and will not make any more money available to Sudan,' insisted Tim Jones of Jubilee Debt Campaign, 'The debt should be cancelled because it is unjust and unpayable, not used to meet targets and massage figures.'