

Castle or Community ? QCEA looks at Europe

This ambitious Quaker conference was sponsored by QPSW and by QCEA (Quaker Council for European Affairs), the latter being the Friends' office in Brussels. 115 Friends from 21 countries explored the tensions between the inspirational humanitarian vision of the founders of the Common Market and the sometimes sordid nationalistic protectionism which emerges under pressures from the outside or even from internal tensions.

Formal opening speeches went straight to the point. Is a refugee a longterm financial gain, or is he an economic threat ? An investment or a drain ? Leavening in our stale society or a divisive trojan horse ?

Government attitudes do not always coincide with the responses of the public when impoverished and frightened refugees arrive uninvited. Slovakia, for example, detains refugees in camps and charges them for the privilege until, their money spent, they are transported to Germany where the public welcome is, even now, heartwarming. Some of the east European countries voice their fear of the unknown, the fear of the difference but at root this is, as in the UK, a reflection of the cries of strident extremists.

Speakers naturally urge us to make sure we know our own spiritual values, transcending national issues and borders. Fear and social mythology has to be examined and faced down. Not so easy in oneself, and equally hard in others; as in individuals, also at a community level - leadership, overt and outspoken leadership - may be necessary.

One widely commended speaker was Molly Scott-Cato, a Green MEP from Gloucester Meeting. She is an academic economist who has added numerous Quaker concerns to her duties at the European Parliament where she is Green Party speaker on the economy. She spoke refreshingly about her work generally but especially with her assertion that to "avoid wars and the causes of war" is itself a valuable financial rule, that is, to act in a Quakerly manner is good economics. She made the uncomfortable point that many refugees are trying to get to Europe to share in that wealth which Europeans took from their countries in past years.

Molly Scott-Cato recommended reading on her subject "*Debt or Democracy*" Mary Mellor, (Pluto ISBN 9780745335544 £19 pb).

Amongst no less than 25 workshops and smaller discussion groups I can only mention a few. The discussion groups were generated and facilitated by spontaneous Friends calls so they inevitably varied in quality.

Asylum and refugees was a continuous subject of conversation during the conference and doubtless also above us amongst governments and around us amongst the public; the workshop on this core problem would have greatly benefitted from a speaker who had current regulatory or legal experience and also perhaps from a Greek or Balkan field practitioner. On the other hand we were introduced to *David Forbes, a Friend from Bull St, Birmingham Meeting*, who has many years experience in refugee support.

I noted that there are Quaker meetings that have provided accomodation and financial support for some years to their local refugee groups, as I understand we also are now doing. One (*Canterbury*) has organized mentoring at a skilled level, to provide longterm confidential support to those who

arrived some years ago – not only recent Syrians. It should be noted that in this context 'mentoring' certainly does not imply any teaching but rather listening, accompanying on request and supporting.

A workshop on “Us and Others” was run by an experienced psychologist practitioner. She probed deep at our own unrecognised assumptions (often = prejudices) and guided us through the sensitive atmosphere when neither party quite trusts the other.

Islam attracted some attention and a discussion group brought out the names of several Moslems who are prepared to speak to other religious groups about their religion, some known to *Qavi* (*Blackheath Meeting*) and to *Leicester Meeting*. It is obviously important to seek speakers from 'the others' if there is any wish to talk about their religion to make sure we do not embed our own myths and assumptions. Many Moslems are acutely aware of the need to address their secular challenges, and the strains it suffers in Christian countries (eg UK) or supposedly secular countries (eg USA, France).

QCEA itself came under scrutiny. After a couple of difficult years there are now new staff in place and even (brace yourselves, Quaker traditionalists) a transition manager to deliver secular changes which can be openly self-evaluated. They feel, in common with our Victorian forefathers, that there is no conflict between good business and good Quakers. QCEA was compared unfavourably with QUNO in Geneva, which has discerned its longterm role, carried out by longterm resident Friends.

This was an ambitious conference at a time of open internal strains in the European Community and public debate of those strains so perhaps the specifics of the title were beyond our reach. Real support and guidance was given to QCEA, which is a tiny organisation; support, guidance and Friendship was given to small meetings across Europe such as Estonia and Moscow. A Friend from Poznan spent 18 hours in a bus to get to Brussels.

For us in our well-fed and safe worship, we may raise our eyes above our near horizons and think of those who worship with us and the challenges they work with. We are 2 hours by train from Brussels.

Other references: *Hungry for Change* (Friends House)
To Trust a Spark, Anne Bennett, (www.postyugoslavlink.com)
Palestinian Children in Israeli Prisons, (project of Norwegian Friends)