

Why Quakers in Britain should become a Low Carbon Community

July this year saw the launch of *The Friends Quarterly* essay competition at Yearly Meeting Gathering in York. September this year saw the launch of the **10:10 Campaign** in London. Both of these are about the future, and neither is about only a short-term future.

The **10:10 Campaign** asks each of us, each individual and each institution, to reduce our carbon footprint by 10% in 2010. But that is only the beginning – we need to follow this by reducing our carbon emissions by 10% year on year. This is known as carbon descent, and groups of people who work together to achieve this are known as low carbon communities. In most cases a low carbon community is a geographically proximate group of people; perhaps a village, a school or other institution, a business, or other similar grouping. But let us consider the possibility of a dispersed low carbon community. Of course, I have in mind Britain Yearly Meeting. What would it mean for Quakers in Britain to be truly a low carbon community?

For this possibility to become real, for it to embody not only our testimony to simplicity but also, and particularly importantly, our testimony to truthfulness, it would require that each of us as individual members of the Yearly Meeting committed ourselves honestly and practically to reducing our carbon emissions by 10% year on year; that each of our meetings and meeting houses did the same; that our gathering together for area meetings or other functions also reduced the carbon emissions of all that travelling; that Woodbrooke and Friends House as institutions also succeeded in this reduction, along with all the other Quaker-owned or Quaker-run organisations around the country; and that we find a low carbon method of holding Yearly Meeting.

To make this real would require from us both commitment and discipline. Our commitment would have to be not only to carbon reduction but also to the corporate witness of Quakers in Britain. The discipline required would encompass not only our carbon-related behaviour but also the spiritual discipline of taking seriously our membership of a larger corporate body.

In any group of people, a balance is required to sustain the healthy functioning of that group: a balance between a focus inward, on the life and processes of the group; and a focus outward, relating to the wider world, to other groups, and embodying the *raison d'être* of the group. Thinking of Friends, we should add also a focus on the Spirit – which is, of course, not the same thing at all as a focus inward on the group.

It is perhaps in the nature of Friends – in the way we worship, in the kinds of people who are attracted to the ways of Friends – that a tendency to turn inwards is very strong. When this becomes dominant, an overriding concern, without the balance of an outward focus, the inevitable tendency is to stagnation and loss of vital energy. Among British Friends, the Quietist period in the eighteenth century led, in the end, to this kind of stagnation.

Friends have perhaps been at their best when tested by external circumstances – when the world presents dilemmas that require the best of Quaker spiritual discipline, individual and corporate. In Britain, this was manifest in the two world wars. Friends had a clear issue to confront, it required steadfastness and faithfulness to do so, and the public stance taken drew many people to seek out Friends for succour, spiritual nurture and practical support.

In modern times there have been, arguably, three major crises that have undermined our view of human beings – of ourselves – as rational human beings. The first was the carnage of the World War One trenches; the second was the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps in spring 1945, revealing to the world the reality of what had gone on; the third was the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, facing us with the knowledge of our potential for terrible, potentially global, destruction.

In each of these cases, the 'ordinary person' could look at what 'they' were doing, or had done, could look to the politicians or the generals, and blame someone else. In his

memoir *The Last Fighting Tommy*, Harry Patch¹ describes how his team of gunners decided not to shoot to kill, as the German foot soldiers were as much victims of the situation as they were themselves; they would aim for the legs, and the injured German would be stretchered off the battlefield and might thus hope to survive the war. So, even in the midst of the fighting, the responsibility was clearly felt to lie elsewhere than with the men who loaded and fired the guns.

In the anti-nuclear campaigning that followed the end of World War Two, it was clearly someone else who was in a position to 'press the button' – everyone else could campaign self-righteously against it.

The present situation, the fourth crisis, is different. There is no-one to point the finger at except ourselves. Those of us who live in the rich industrialised West are part of the problem, just by living, just by getting up in the morning and going about our normal business, we are part of the problem. Even those of us who are working very hard at reducing our carbon emissions are part of the problem. So we can campaign and protest (and we surely need to do those things) but we also have to change our lives in ways that most people have barely glimpsed yet. We can't rely on technology to enable us to continue with business as usual by other means.

This is an exciting time to be alive, because – quite literally – everything we do makes a difference.

We are going to be tested: as individuals, as families, as communities, as nations, and as the whole tribe of humanity. Quakers in Britain, will be tested as a religious body. And the outcome is uncertain; just as in the seventeenth century, when the Pilgrim families set off for the New World, we do not know what awaits us, we do not know if we will survive, we do not know if we, or our children or their children, will return – where, in our case, 'return' is not a geographic returning, but a cultural one.

¹ Harry Patch (with Richard van Emden), *The Last Fighting Tommy: the life of Harry Patch, the only surviving veteran of the trenches*, London: Bloomsbury, 2007

So this is potentially a moment in history when Quakers are needed – needed to be faithful to Quaker testimonies; needed to be visible, to be speaking out, to be offering leadership; needed to ‘do the right thing’ in the face of external pressing circumstances. To use a phrase of Gandhi’s, Quakers – individually and corporately – need, and are needed, to ‘be the change we wish to see in the world’. To do and be so will require us to deepen our spiritual grounding, alone and together – not only for inward exploration but for the future of human society.

A further challenge will be to find the corporate will, the rediscovery of a depth of corporate discipline, to undertake this wholly and fully – and not just as a matter of some individuals’ personal choices. Our dispersed and devolved patterns of leadership, authority and decision-making place upon us an added layer of difficulty in this. Other churches and faith groups, with more traditional hierarchical organisational patterns, are forging ahead in this field, in their own ways – it remains to be discovered to what extent the ‘ordinary’ congregation members will follow their leaders.

But if we, as Friends, were to find the way to do this, we would not only contribute vitally to the necessary decarbonising of British society; we would not only offer a beacon of leadership to others lacking a community context; we would also strengthen, deepen and revitalise the life of our Society.

Are we ready to undertake this?