

## THE NATURAL WORLD: TOWARDS A NEW TESTIMONY

How the world began is a question that has provoked many different answers. So does the question how it will end. There can, however, be no doubt in the early days of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that one species, man, has an unparalleled power to damage- or even to end- life as we know it. If disaster is to be avoided man must change his ways. This includes Quakers, in our own lives, as well as in seeking to influence others.

For some 450 years, Friends individually and collectively have been prepared to challenge prevailing opinion and authority, when convinced that they should do so. One thinks of John Woolman's witness against slavery, of Elizabeth Fry and prison reform, of George Fox and many others over the centuries in terms of non-violent protest and conscientious objection to war. Collectively, our Quaker Testimonies are a light to us and to others in relation to Truth, Simplicity, Peace and Equality.

Currently we have no such shared testimony on trusteeship of the natural world. It is vital and urgent that we formulate one, to guide our own lives, to influence others, and to combat the evil that threatens the present and future of the world. There is, I am sure, a rising awareness among Friends of this need.

Advices and queries (paragraph 42 in the Second Edition of Quaker Faith and Practice) give an eloquent starting point:

'We do not own the world, and its riches are not ours to dispose of at will. Show a loving consideration for all creatures, and seek to maintain the beauty and variety of the world. Work to ensure that our increasing power over nature is used responsibly, with reverence for life. Rejoice in the splendour of God's continuing creation.'

So does chapter 25 of Quaker Faith and Practice, on Unity of Creation. But eloquent starting points are not a Testimony, for this requires rigorous testing at all levels in the Society, and discernment, as in the recent example of reaching a position on Same Sex Marriages.

My argument in this essay is that a Testimony on stewardship of the earth is long overdue, and I will attempt to lay out some of the issues that it must cover.

### Climate change, but not climate change alone

The earth's climate appears to be warming, with serious consequences, including the melting of ice-sheets and perma-frost, a consequent rise in the sea-level, fresh-water shortages (particularly in Africa) and drastic changes in weather patterns, affecting agricultural productivity and food supplies. Prevailing scientific opinion is that the substantial rise in global average temperatures since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century is due primarily to man, through an increase in man-made greenhouse gas (GHG) concentration, affecting the penetration of the earth's atmosphere by solar radiation. This is the view of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which influenced the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to develop the Kyoto Protocol, committing 37 industrialised countries, including

Britain, to reduce their collective GHG emissions by an average 5% from 1990 levels over the period 2008 to 2012. (By the Climate Change Act, 2008 Britain has already committed itself to a reduction of one-third by 2020 and 80% by 2050.) The UNFCCC will meet again in December 2009 in Copenhagen, where the Society of Friends will be represented.

There are, however, at least 4 problems about moving forward from the Kyoto Protocol. One is that the USA, among the largest generators of GHG per head (as opposed to total GHG emissions, where China, with its massive population, now leads, in absolute terms) has still not signed up to any reduction. We can hope that President Obama will resolve this impasse. Second, there is a threatened stand-off between 'developed' and 'developing' countries. Stemming from Kyoto, the quantified commitments made so far are by developed/industrialised countries, which are by far the heaviest producers of GHG emissions per head. For the future, the biggest increases in emissions are likely to come from China, India and other industrialising economies. Those who have already made commitments are anxious that these high-growth, industrialising economies should also cap their emissions. Indeed it is imperative they do, to contain the problem. But at what levels and on what terms, when their emissions per head are, in the main, far below those of the US, Europe and Australia? Apart from the question of levels, if they are to use low-carbon to develop their economies, they argue that the wealthier nations must make major contributions to their costs. Western economies developed using a model that is proving non-sustainable in the long term, starting with colonial exploitation, continuing with the industrial revolution, and now capping it by 'offshoring' energy intensive manufacturing and services to developing countries. We are being hypocritical, they maintain, in asking them to resolve problems for which we are primarily responsible. Moreover, we have the economic resources either to cut our own emissions further, so that they can catch up, or to subsidise the actions that they will need to take to develop with cleaner technologies. Fortunately, the Vulnerable Nations Forum of 18 Asian and African countries has recently emerged, asking rich countries to pay their cost of adaptation, but themselves aspiring for low-carbon development and carbon neutrality.

A third problem is that, in Britain- and even more strongly in the United States- public opinion is far from accepting the case for urgent, substantial action, if it will cause personal inconvenience. In early November 2009, a poll by Populus for The Times of a random sample of 1504 adults, found that 83% believed that climate change is happening, but only 41% accepted as established that the change is largely man-made. Of the 83%, a majority opposed increasing the cost of motoring (53%), or the price of meat (52%). Most (62%) thought climate change a serious problem, but not the most serious that we face. In the US, a survey by the Pew Center in October 2009 found that only 57% of Americans believe climate change is happening and only 36% believe this to be caused by human activity.

And, finally, government targets, while important, do not guarantee success. As Tolstoy observed in 'War and Peace', 'The generals, the institutions can select a strategy, lay it all out, but what happens on the battlefield is quite different.' We are already seeing in our present government's admirable campaign to eliminate child poverty, that reaching tough targets is harder than setting them. The same will prove the case with reductions in carbon emissions.

After consulting Meetings, Meeting for Sufferings agreed a statement on sustainability in June 2009, and Quaker Peace and Social Witness has produced a briefing pack entitled 'Responding to Climate Change.' At all levels in the Society, locally, regionally, nationally and internationally, Friends are busy seeking to understand and form a considered view about the issues. Some will find these processes fascinating, others frustrating. What matters, however, is that we truly seek the Light, listening and learning, and working out what we are called upon to do. Some may, by the nature of the position that they hold or the job they do, have some direct influence on governmental or international actions. Most of us will not. There are nevertheless responsibilities that are ours, either because they concern our own use of the earth's resources in our daily lives, or, in conjunction with others, through non-violent political action. Remember John Woolman's example.

### Extinction of Species:

According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which maintains a 'red list' of endangered species, a fifth of all known mammals, a third of amphibians and more than two thirds of plants are currently under threat of extinction. 2010 is to be the International Year of Biodiversity but, as the Director of the IUCN's Biodiversity Conservation Group has put it, 'The scientific evidence of an extinction crisis is mounting... It's time for governments to start getting serious about saving species and make sure it's high on their agendas for next year, as we're rapidly running out of time.'

The proportion of species at risk has increased dramatically in recent times. Currently, of the 5490 mammal species so far identified, 70(1.4%) are extinct or no longer exist in the wild, 188(3.4%) are critically endangered, 449(8.2%) endangered and 505(9.2%) vulnerable, according to the IUCN.

While climate change undoubtedly increases the risks for some species (think of polar bears, for example) it is not the primary cause. Even without climate change, the main threat is man, sometimes as hunter (whether for meat or sport) but more often less directly. Destruction of habitat is an illustration. Whether it is the felling of rainforest, or the rooting-out of British hedgerows, it threatens the survival of the mammals, amphibians, birds and plants that live there. Other changes in agricultural methods and the use of pesticides can be a threat, as can the pollution of streams, rivers and lakes.

Over-fishing and pollution of the seas present an equally grave danger to marine life. Fish stocks have fallen catastrophically, mainly because of the introduction of massively lethal methods of catching fish. In addition, the seas are becoming more and more heavily polluted.

Among the greatest wonders of our lives are the beauty and variety of the natural world in which we live, and of the creatures that share this world with us. In my lifetime, living mainly in rural parts of Britain, there has been a marked reduction in numbers and varieties of birds, animals and wild flowers seen. White or Darwin visiting us now would be horrified. Yet, this can still be changed. Conservation and reintroduction can work, as the red kite and other examples show.

The second chapter of the book of Genesis (verse 15) has it (Authorised Version) that God put man into the garden 'to dress it and to keep it'. We do not have to be fundamentalists to believe, as have many of the world's native peoples, that man has a duty to preserve the world's beauty and diversity. It is a wicked irony( at which the Devil, if there is a Devil, will laugh uproariously) if, at precisely the time when, through magnificent photography and wild life programmes, more people than ever before have seen at close quarters the wonders of the natural world, we fail 'to dress and keep it.'

#### Consumerism:

Today, in the Western world, and in large swathes of the East, the dominant concept of a desirable world seems to be driven by consumerism, markets and economic growth. Success in life is to be measured by financial success and having money to spend. Even the wealthy rarely feel that they have enough.

In the recent near-collapse of the world's financial systems, many banks would have failed but for government interventions, because they had loaned money unwisely and these loans had turned toxic. The favoured remedies were not about reducing borrowings. On the contrary, in a world where too many people have borrowed too much, putting gratification ahead of prudence, governmental remedies were about pumping trillions of dollars (or pounds or euros) into the banks and urging them to advance more credit. To facilitate this, you will recall that national banks adopted 'Quantitative Easing', involving expanding the money supply.

I do not quarrel with the notion that these interventions were necessary to save the financial world, in the short term, from melt-down. But what a mad world it is when the remedy for over-borrowing and unsound loans is to pump vast sums into banks that have behaved irresponsibly, and encourage us as consumers to borrow more and continue spending.

As Quakers we hold a Testimony of Simplicity. Advices and queries number 41 tells us: 'Try to live simply. A simple lifestyle freely chosen is a source of strength. Do not be persuaded into buying what you do not need or cannot afford.' And Quakers do take this advice to heart. Probably those of us who grew up in the Second World War are conditioned to be more frugal than some and are at times disgusted by what we see as profligacy and over-indulgence. Even so, most of us accumulate more during our lives than we need.

Another feature of consumerism is that, by focusing on material possessions and easily obtained gratification, it tends to stifle creativity. Over the centuries Quakers have often had a troubled relationship with the arts, seeing them as a distraction from God. Of course they are not, and the arts flourish among Quakers today, with barely a tremor of misgiving or disapproval. But for us, as for others, to quote Wordsworth: 'Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.' It is not that the arts in a grand, professional sense are in danger, but that in the daily lives of our selves, our children and our grandchildren we need to nourish creative appreciation and enjoyment, and, most of all nurture the actual doing of creative things, whether that be the making of music or the creative use of our hands or any other form of creativity.

When we consider how many people in the world starve, or spend their lives struggling in poverty, we have to recognise the justice and urgency of their aspiration for adequate food, clean water, shelter and safety. Granted the increasingly obvious fact that the world's resources are limited, and are endangered by policies of unlimited exploitation, we surely must accept that consumerism is an inadequate model. It has to be balanced by restraint on the part of those who have, by any reasonable criteria, more than enough, and by a willingness to share.

### Inequities:

One of our four longstanding Quaker Testimonies is on the equality of all people before God. A result was a frequent refusal to recognise differences in status, according to the usages of the time. Hence Thomas Ellwood (1639-1713) refused 'hat honour' to his father and insisted on addressing him as 'Thou' rather than the more respectful 'You', to his father's great disgust. When it came to addressing Judges in Court, or others in authority in the same way, one can readily understand the irritation that our fellow Quakers caused in those days, and the troubles this brought down on their heads.

Equality between women and men was another inescapable facet of this Testimony, and Quakers were far ahead of their time in recognising this. From Margaret Fell onwards, women were not only highly influential, they also took positions of leadership and public witness.

By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Friends were becoming deeply concerned about slavery. In the Southern US states, in particular, some Quakers owned slaves. Only after a long, fearless campaign by John Woolman and others, were they persuaded that slavery was wrong.

Equity is not the same as equality, although there is a relationship between them. Equality means, among other things, that people are the same in value, regardless of age, sex, colour or creed. Equity is about fairness in the way people are dealt with, despite their differences. These differences may be innate, or may result from accidents of birth, fortune or misfortune. Thus, while firmly holding to our Testament of identical value, we recognise, however reluctantly, that people's circumstances differ. The issue then, is whether, taking all these circumstances into account, individuals are treated as fairly as a just society will allow. If so, we may call that equitable.

Inequity, as others have already pointed out (including Quaker Peace and Social Witness (QPSW)), is a deeply worrying issue in the context of climate change. Even within the context of Britain, taken in isolation, it is obvious that people's ability to cope with the risks and consequences of flooding will be affected by their incomes and assets. People who are poor are less likely to be adequately insured, or to be able to face the increasing costs of insurance in high-risk areas.

In a worldwide context, the issue is even more stark. According to the World Bank's 2008 World Development Indicators, of the 262 million people affected each year (on

average) by a climate –related disaster between 2000 and 2004, 98% were living in developing countries, i.e. the world’s poorer countries. As QPSW comments, in ‘Responding to climate change’, ‘The poorest in society, whether they live in New Orleans or in the villages of Bangladesh, have fewer options, opportunities or resources to enable them to adapt and to recover if disaster does hit.’ But society’s collective resources are clearly less in the poorer countries, not only to help individual families, but to repair infrastructure and keep essential services running, including security, health services and education.

As I have argued throughout this essay, the questions about what is equitable, and about how we increase fairness in the world, are not peculiar to climate change, important as they are in this context. As soon as we accept that the world’s resources are limited, and that they can be threatened by human actions, we have a problem that cannot readily be resolved by individual initiatives, nor by markets. They call for a collective response, at some level, in some form.

Without an acceptable collective response, individuals and nations are likely to set equity aside and put their own interests first. That way lie conflict, selfishness and violence—also war, political instability, and increased migration as individuals seek safety.

#### Overemphasis on economic growth:

International comparisons and national policy discussions are largely made in economic terms, with an inbuilt assumption that growth of Gross National Product is the ultimate good. While it is true that some international agencies and some charitable foundations are seeking to extend the range of indicators used—even, for example, to include an index of human happiness—it is inherent in my argument that, for the future, we must insist on a balanced scorecard approach, including sensitive indicators of environmental damage and recovery, alongside more traditional economic measures. To agree sensible national and international policies, what we need to measure is sustainable development.

#### Towards a new Testimony:

Our responsibility for the stewardship of the natural world and its resources is so fundamental and urgent that we should develop a new Testimony to address it. In this essay I have suggested some of the facets that need to be covered, and have argued that they extend beyond climate change, important as that is. It is not my contention that this essay is in any way an adequate treatment of the topic. At best it is a statement of concern and a plea to the Society of Friends collectively to define our position and to take it forward into action. Some of these actions must be about seeking , in conjunction with others, to influence public opinion and governmental action, while others (see, for example, ‘Walk Cheerfully, Step Lightly’, Living Witness Project, 2008) are practical steps, open to us individually and at the local level.

It has become clear to me, in writing this essay, that our Testimonies are complementary and interdependent. Each is important in itself, but they are at their most powerful together. Whether or not this is correct, our existing Testimonies have

a bearing on our attitudes and actions in relation to the issues discussed here. Our Testimony on Simplicity, for example, affects our views about the materialism of a consumerist society. Our Testimony on Equality will help to define our attitudes on equity. Our Peace Testimony, which is not only about non-violence, but also our duty to 'take away the occasion of all wars', bears strongly upon our response to inequities. Our Truth Testimony requires not only that we proclaim the Truth, but also that we do so simply and honestly, with respect for evidence.

You may then ask 'Why is a new Testimony required?' My answer is that our existing Testimonies are primarily about our duties to God and our neighbour (Christ's first and second commandments). What is new, urgent and overwhelmingly important is the need to define more clearly our responsibility to all other creatures and to the world itself. These concerns are not new. Individual Quakers have expressed them over the centuries, but that was also the way that our existing Testimonies have developed. Now is the time, with creation facing a long-foreseeable threat that is now upon us, to proclaim for ourselves and for others where we stand.

Working towards a new Testimony may not be easy, because Friends are perhaps more divided than ever before about the existence and nature of God, and about the divinity of Jesus. On the other hand, we may surprise ourselves and find that we can readily unite in our response to this challenge. I pray that it may be so.

Sources used are principally Quaker documents, The Economist and The Times newspaper.

