

## Castle or community? Quakers role in building a new Europe

From the 4-6 December, 110 Friends from across Europe gathered for the Quaker Council for European Affairs / Quaker Peace and Social Witness conference to reflect on some fundamental questions; what is our vision for Europe? What needs to change in order to get there? And how can Quakers take action to translate our vision into reality? On Friday Friends arrived in Brussels to consider these questions, with many other issues and worries competing in our heads. On Sunday we parted energised and ready to act together to help build a new Europe.

The conference brought together Friends from worshipping communities in 23 different countries, to form one community. When we arrived, our ideas and questions about Europe were inevitably coloured by recent events; notably the murders in Paris and subsequent reactions, from the level four alert in Belgium and France's "declaration of war" on Daesh, to the United Kingdom's decision to launch air strikes in Syria and a heightened military presence across Europe. On the minds of many was the refugee crisis, which continues unabated despite lessening media interest, worsening weather and proliferating border fences. Further back, though perhaps dim in the memory, was the Greek economic crisis which played out between central European institutions and the Greek government.



Rachel Bayani, Bahá'í Representative to the EU, with Arne Springorum of Prauge Meeting. Photo: Kate McNally, BLYM.

On Friday evening, we began by addressing our context; Lina Jordan (QCEA British Committee) showed us a series of pictures depicting all these issues. Choosing to confront the conference's context was crucial in allowing us to acknowledge the world in which we have to live and work, as we came together with all our various concerns. Lina elaborated on complex systems, of which the most complex is our human world. The image from this session that many will remember is of a wall covered in post-it notes; the hope was to avoid leaving participants feeling lost amongst the complexity, pulled

in many directions at once. Instead, the conference was geared towards allowing Friends to find their own clarity, and to act on that basis.

On Saturday we began with some inputs. Rachel Bayani, Doris Peschke and Arne Springorum spoke about the Europe they'd like to see and



the steps to get there. Rachel, Baha'i representative to the EU, touched on the need to create a more productive discourse on migration by complementing legal and technical approaches with a focus on our shared humanity. Doris, secretary of the Churches commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME), used the example of the refugees travelling to Europe to talk about the Europe she would like to see. Lastly, Arne, a German Friend living in Prague, argued that while we must acknowledge that borders are real, that we can and should nevertheless choose to focus on our shared values.

After these top-level overviews, participants were given the chance to delve into a subject or two of their interest in two workshop sessions, which covered a number of themes including Asylum & Refugees, EU militarism, Economic Justice and the UK/EU Relationship (in light of the upcoming referendum on UK membership). Andrew Lane (QCEA Representative) facilitated a workshop on European security that focussed on how to develop a new concept of security based on well-being across Europe.

Participants discussed events from Paris to Ukraine, the EU's response to these, and the compounding role of arms trade lobbyists in Brussels. All workshops enabled Friends to share their experiences and interest, and learn about situations and activities in other countries.



Friends listen to Molly Scott-Cato, MEP for South West England. Photo: Kate McNally

Our keynote speaker was Molly Scott Cato, one of two Quaker Members of the European Parliament. She too addressed the issue of building the Europe we'd like to see, touching on many issues from the refugee crisis, to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and the growth of corporate power. She spoke movingly of the solidarity between French and German parliamentarians in the wake of the Paris murders, standing together, a powerful reminder of Europe's clearest success - preventing war between its members since the end of the Second World War - and of Europe's failure to build peace beyond its borders.

QPSW's Suzanne Ismail and Elizabeth Payne led an open space session, a new discussion technique for many continental Friends, which enabled participants to air some of their concerns and make connections across the continent. A wide range of conversations ensued, including those on the right to food, networking across Europe, Syria and the role of minority languages in Europe.

Sunday morning, after an information-packed Saturday, turned us to action. We were led to establish groups to discuss vital issues, from climate change and food, to refugees, the arms trade and non-violence, to Eastern Europe and the UK-EU referendum. Crucially each group was challenged to bring back at least one concrete action to the plenary session. For example the group focussed on the UK referendum on the EU discussed how to inform local meetings about the debates and discussed the draft of a 'Quakers for Europe' manifesto. Those looking at Eastern Europe hope to spread Quaker ideas to Belarus, and many others committed to write articles, and coordinate email lists to continue the conversation.

In the new year we will share a more detailed account of these groups. We hope we will see the fruits of all of these fledgling groups across Europe in the coming months.