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*The following speech was delivered on the last day of the biennial QCEA Conference held over 5-7<sup>th</sup> December 2008 in Brussels. The conference explored the meaning of individual responsibility in an age of climate change and resource depletion.*

This weekend just over a hundred Quakers from around Europe have gathered together to discuss what until recently seemed a fanciful proposition: that human beings have unintentionally managed to alter the environment that sustains them to such an extent that their continued existence is now in question.

This environmental change has not come about by the cataclysm of nuclear war, nor in any conventional sense has this situation come about through greed or stupidity, but rather through the cumulative effect of the ordinary everyday private and professional actions of millions of people, primarily in the Western world, using energy to go about their daily lives.

In so far as they thought about their energy use at all, these people did not think of heating their homes, flying in planes, driving cars or eating out of season as extravagant or damaging. On the contrary, this use of energy was a sign of progress, of comfort, of the triumph of human ingenuity over the cruel vicissitudes of nature. This pattern of energy use did not contravene any social norms, nor did it in any obvious sense violate any commonly held moral principles.

And yet, as scientific knowledge about climate change has become clearer and as academic knowledge has developed about the impacts of fossil fuel exploitation on conflict, human rights and the stunted economic development of entire nations, the moral challenge of our energy use has become more apparent.

The implications for behaviour are so huge and sometimes so complex that it is hard not to switch off, to give in to the challenge, and continue with business as usual. Confused messages from governments and the media imply that while there is a problem, life will – and should – amble on without disruption.

This conference has been about facing, rather than turning away from the challenge. Facing the challenge though does not negate its complexity, and the variety of responses and questions which have arisen from the discussions and workshops this weekend have reflected that.

The issues covered by this conference raise deeply challenging questions about how we live our lives, and about how we think about Quakerism and what it means to be Quakers. One question posed in a workshop session yesterday was ‘how do we use the resource of Quakers’, a question recalling perhaps the collective power of the

Quakers who worked to end the slave trade or campaigned for better social and prison conditions.

Yet this idea of the collective power of Quakers leads us to ask whether we can yet assert a common Quaker position on climate change, our energy use and the necessary response. Are we sure that we are aiming at the same goal? If we are, do we have a shared view of the means to reach that goal? Can we see a way forward together, even if disparate views exist? Which is the more powerful force in our lives – the moral conviction of Quaker faith or the subtle power of social norms?

I think this conference has shown that the desire among delegates for collective action is strong and passionately held – and indeed there has been an overwhelming sense that we have no option but to act – that not to act would be to betray the Quaker principle of building the kingdom here on earth. The will it seems is there – and this conference has explored what the options are for the way.

The desire to clarify what the facts are stems from the truth testimony, and has underpinned this weekend's discussions. The ethical dilemmas of green consumerism, food miles and love miles have been prominent in the workshops. What would become of vegetable growers in Kenya if Europeans came to rely only on locally sourced food? What if getting rid of our cars merely frees up cash to spend on flights to holiday destinations? What happens to people in the developing world who rely on tourism if we decide to forgo flying?

We look for the facts in these cases so that we can make clear moral decisions – but the facts are sometimes elusive. We may be inspired by John Woolman's injunction to consider the full consequences of our actions, but it may be frustratingly complicated to actually ascertain facts, and from facts likely consequences.

While the ethical minutiae of green living may confuse us, we *can* see the bigger picture of climate science and our resource use much more clearly.

We have heard from our keynote speakers that as European citizens we are playing a key role in perpetuating patterns of unsustainable energy resource consumption. We have become dependent on fragile, fossil fuel based energy systems, which when they fail, leave us unable to carry out even the most basic daily tasks.

To feed these fragile systems, we source fuel from countries where fuel revenues prop up undemocratic governments which abuse the human rights of their citizens. These revenues also drive violent conflict and stunt economic development. When we burn this fuel, we are contributing towards global warming which the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change confirms is causing arctic sea ice to melt, sea levels to rise, and increasingly severe weather conditions, drought and flooding.

The developed world, with Europe as a key actor, is responsible for the majority of greenhouse gas emissions which drive climate change. Dangerous feedback mechanisms threaten to accelerate global warming, and suggest that mitigation efforts will have to be more intensive and urgently implemented.

At the same time we may be approaching limits to growth in oil production which threatens potentially abrupt disruption to the energy system, with the likelihood of increased exploitation of dirty fuels like the Canadian tar sands. Meanwhile, research suggests that the growth-oriented economic system which drives increasing fossil fuel exploitation is in fact failing to meet our basic needs, and that there is no correlation between increased economic growth and increased individual wellbeing.

A common theme in workshop discussions was that such systemic problems are driving energy use – systemic problems which suggest that individual lifestyle adjustments may not be enough if we are seeking wholesale change.

We have heard also that at the root of the problem is a culture of individualism, that leads people to ask the question ‘Is there enough for me?’, rather than ‘Is there enough for you?’, ‘Is there enough for them?’, ‘Is there enough for all of us?’ Yet, we have been reminded that we have agency, the agency to act individually to change our lifestyles, and also to act on our responsibility to engage with government to work towards large-scale change.

We have reflected on how the peace testimony should inform our attitude towards energy use, and how the seeds of war are contained in our energy consumption habits. We have considered what simplicity might mean in the age of the energy-intensive consumer society, but have wondered how Quaker simplicity can be communicated to a non-Quaker society with a different set of priorities and assumptions. Could Friends be seen as beacons, exemplars for simple, low-carbon living, able to act simultaneously within and without of the wider society?

Yesterday’s scenario planning sessions gave Friends the opportunity to imagine different ways in which societies could respond to environmental and social crises. These workshops generated positive, exciting visions of how Friends can make the best of the Quaker tradition to serve a world in increasing trouble. I noticed three broad trends in the response to the scenario sessions, which indicate how Quakers think about themselves and what they have to offer: diplomacy, group action and individual example.

The latter revolves around the idea that Friends can become ‘simple living experts’ – almost like consultants to society at large. People living their principles in a manner increasingly in tune with a natural world on the brink of breakdown, in a manner which may come to make more sense to the wider population as the tectonic stresses we are facing become more widely accepted.

Diplomacy refers to the particular Quaker skills to bring people together, to reach out across the boundaries of faith to seek common goals and build connections. Group action refers to the desire to work together as Quakers to respond to the needs of society at large. I was particularly interested in the idea of a Quaker disaster response team, one that could prepare itself to work as a kind of social glue should major problems occur. Certainly, the Quaker tradition of seeking that of God in everyone, avoiding moralistic judgments and seeking to understand and nurture others lends itself to such an undertaking.

These three facets could underpin a special Quaker response developing social and

environmental problems. The most challenging of these perhaps is simple living and I think this has been born out in a number of the discussions that I observed. It seems that Friends have different ideas of what simple living means in practice.

For some the radical low-energy lifestyle brings joy and spiritual fulfilment, but it is possible that for others, perhaps for the majority, such a lifestyle transformation would involve painful sacrifice - the inability to visit a relative far away for instance -, the loss of cherished comforts and a sense of cold austerity or 'doing without'. In other words, appropriate living in this context might well feel like privation to some, even when it's a joy for others. There may be a sense of denial of pleasure and restriction of opportunity in such a lifestyle change.

This is not to say that the rational and moral basis for radical lifestyle change is flawed, but only that the process may be much more difficult for some people than others, and that sensitivity to this reality is important if there is to be understanding between Friends.

I wonder if another message that we can take from this conference is that the narrative of doing without, of using less for moral reasons, while on a rational level being sufficient in itself, needs to be augmented with a narrative about creativity and the wonders of human creation. Humans are strangely conflicted animals in that we can create works of profound beauty and also create the seeds of our own destruction.

Sometimes these two things happen simultaneously. The great Quaker industrialists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century may have thought of their creations as wonderful contributions to human progress; yet we now look on the industrial revolution over the long term as a kind of unintentionally self-destructive environmental disaster. Perhaps this ties in with the comments made by Friends on Friday night about beauty being a necessary accompaniment to puritanism and moral rectitude.

This conference has incorporated songwriting and a contemplative experiential activity using clay for the first time in QCEA conference history, and I think this has been valuable not only in exercising a different part of our brains in the process of reflection on the conference subject, but also as a reminder that striving for the transcendent and beautiful is an antidote to the greyness of austerity and serious moral considerations.

Much of the workshop discussion this weekend has reflected a keen interest among Friends in technology and in some of the conversations I've had I've shared my own sense of wonder at some of the amazing renewable technologies which can help us mitigate climate change and the energy crisis.

Perhaps it is possible to create a vision for the future which incorporates lifestyle simplicity, and also full engagement with the human need for creating new physical things, be it works of art and music, or awe-inspiring renewable power installations. There may be a danger that in overemphasising the moral and practical gravity of the situation, that we squash or suppress our instinct for making wonderful things.

Is it possible that we can combine a realistic appreciation of the severity of the crisis, with an exuberant joy at the prospect of building, metaphorically and literally, a

better, albeit very different, society? Is there a balance that we can strike between the aspiration to build a tower of Babel and the resignation that we have blown it and now have to pay for it with austerity?