

QCEA Open Conversation on COVID-19

Friday 12 June 2020

SUMMARY

Making sense of what is happening, and discerning what to do. That was the idea behind an open conversation which the Quaker Council for European Affairs organised on Friday, 12th June. Sixty-eight Quakers and friends from across Europe met, virtually, to explore the implications of Covid for work now and in the future.

In the first session, **During COVID**, we explored the immediate implications of the pandemic on peace, human rights and European politics. Czech, Swiss, British insights came in a stream. How to compress so much into a few minutes when so much is happening? We heard of the unequal impact of Covid, reinforcing patterns of inequality and privilege. We heard examples of solidarity, of the complex intertwining of gratefulness and anguish which experience of isolation can provoke. Clemence Buchet-Couzy, working on the QCEA Peace Programme, warned of the insidious negative impacts of using war language to encapsulate efforts to control the epidemic.

In the second session, **After COVID**, we sought both to understand what may happen, and what we can collectively do to have positive impact. Molly Scott-Cato called for massive support for job creation and the green economy while letting carbon-intensive industries wither. And reminded us that the hallucinating levels of wealth inequality must be levelled. Juliet Prager implored us to feel the interconnectedness of our lives and the world around us. We must act in the present while taking a long view. Jude Kirton-Darling pointed out that Covid's unequal impact results from decades of growing inequality and austerity. We must build a better economy, we must build a better society. These were only some of the reflections from a whirlwind session.

QCEA will distil all this so that its General Assembly - representatives of Yearly Meetings across Europe – can take stock when next they meet. Our 'meeting of minds' will not stop with this meeting, we'll see how to take it forward, to make positive change more possible.

The entire meeting was convened by **Jeremy Lester**, Clerk of the Quaker Council for European Affairs.

DURING COVID

Andrew Lane (QCEA Director) began the session started by explaining the busy period the Quaker Council for European Affairs has had since the beginning of the pandemic. QCEA understands that European responses to the pandemic are affecting us all differently, and have been working for inclusive policies that promote equality and justice. To understand the complex and fast changing situation across Europe QCEA created a platform that allowed anyone to submit information to us. We structured this platform around 6 areas:

1. What emergency and additional powers are European governments taking at this time?
2. What is the specific legislation being used?
3. What human rights abuses are taking place?
4. What acts of solidarity are taking place, and how are marginalised groups being resilient to, and resisting, harmful policies?
5. What is the impact of public narratives, especially related to migration or 'othering'?
6. Is the role of the military changing in society? (We know this can creep up in a crisis).

Andrew explained that 150 written submissions had been made to QCEA, a culmination of thousands of hours of work of volunteers and concerned citizens across Europe.

Evelyn Shire spoke next from Britain. Evelyn shared about the disproportionate risk of COVID-19 related death facing Black and Asian people, and particularly South Asian people in the UK. Highlighting several recent reports covering access to health services and broader socio-economic disadvantages that parts of our communities face. Evelyn told Friends how the average age of death varied by ethnic group between 15 and 50%. Evelyn ended by reminding us that the UK is one of the most unequal societies in Europe.

Pavlina Haufova spoke from the Czech Republic about a sharp increase in social solidarity during the COVID-19. She gave the example of the Vietnamese communities that had raised money for ventilators for hospitals and had been providing hospitality to health care workers. Some private companies had been distributing hand gel for free. Some community groups formed to make personal protective equipment. The massive response surprised Pavlina herself, and Friends we pleased to hear some of the positive developments that had happened.

Rorie Nazareth (Assistant Clerk of QCEA) had consulted with both the German and French-speaking parts of Switzerland Yearly Meeting. Quakers in Switzerland have been more active, meeting online more often. Many Friends in Switzerland are concerned about the period ahead. They are responding by thinking more deeply about systemic racism. They are also continuing to pay the venue of their Yearly Meeting, even though it was cancelled, and a project in Cape Town.

The next person to share was **Kékéli Kpognon** (Senior Human Rights Programme Officer at QCEA) speaking on the subject of marginalisation. Kékéli explained that she was mindful that she was a middle-class, educated, employed and healthy person, but that these privileges were trumped even for her by being an African woman migrant in Europe. Kékéli talked about the lives of key workers, but that this new public recognition did not protect their lives. In an insightful testimony Kékéli explained that those living at the margins were not looking to be co-opted into the centre but have long been envisaging and working to build a world where peace, justice and equality have real meaning for all – whether it is a time of crisis or not.

Clémence Buchet--Couzy (Peace Programme Assistant at QCEA) spoke next about the use of war rhetoric in relation to the pandemic. Clémence shared the result of her research into the language of political leaders, and gave examples, including a speech (16 March) in which the French President said ‘We are at War’ seven times. In Italy the government called for a war time economy. Firstly, it is insensitive to those who are really suffering war-like violence, such as in Yemen, Syria or Sudan. Secondly, by referring to the invisible enemy there will be an increase in anxiety generally, and also specifically fear of the ‘other’ – and Europe has seen an increase in hate crime. Clémence referred to military spending, saying military equipment was of no use in a pandemic, but that less had been spent on other activities, such as pandemic preparedness and climate change.

Finally, **Andrew Lane** spoke again briefly about other issues that QCEA had been engaging governments about during the pandemic in parts of Europe not yet discussed. He shared about human rights violations in Croatia and Slovenia, LGBTI rights and media freedom in Hungary and refugee camps in Greece. Andrew also mentioned a recent QCEA article about poor conditions for agricultural workers in Spain. Finally he mentioned a positive case in Italy where prisoners had given up some of their food so that this could be shared with homeless people, and that this idea had spread to other prisons.

AFTER COVID

The second session of the open conversation focused on the social, economic and political implications of the COVID-19 pandemic in the longer term. The lockdowns imposed across Europe to control the spread of the pandemic have had incredibly significant economic consequences, forcing massive and radical shifts in public spending orthodoxy. What will a post-COVID Europe look like, how will we pay for it, and how do we seize the opportunity to decarbonise as we recover?

The After COVID session began with a contribution from **Molly Scott Cato**, a Quaker who was also a Green MEP until the UK's withdrawal from the European Union. She began by referring to the grave economic crisis facing the UK and others, but suggested that "degrowth" may be a good thing in terms of sustainability. A system of "economic triage" will be needed, and greener industries and practices should be favoured in the process. Similarly, people should be reskilled to engage with this new economic reality.

Molly continued to address the economy, warning of the "disaster" posed by austerity in the years to come, favouring instead wealth redistribution via a wealth tax – reducing inequality in the process – and quantitative easing to support sustainable companies and investments. Borrowing is not taboo but is not the only solution, and must be pooled so that poorer countries do not suffer like they did after 2008. How might debt cancellation become more necessary in a changed world when everyone will be laden with the coronavirus bill?

Molly referred to a [recent report](#) published by the Green Party which expands on her contribution.

Next, **Juliet Prager**, Deputy Recording Clerk for Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM), spoke on the theme of faith in action. She reflected on the "blessings" of lockdown, despite the constraints – being able to spend time at home in the garden – and called on us to make an effort to preserve the new equilibrium which many of us have found to be pleasant. Quakers have a long-term view, and see linkages between issues, and Juliet noted that we are thus well-placed to play a part in this effort. On that subject, she told us that BYM had signed up to an initiative called "[Build Back Better](#)," which calls for public investment, economic system change and decarbonisation in the wake of the pandemic. She's proud that BYM has spoken up for change in this way.

Mieke Van Opheusden, a Dutch Quaker, spoke about climate and racial justice. COVID is just a taste of the environmental crisis which is ahead, she argues, and is a reminder of the fragility of our societies and the most vulnerable within them. Climate change may create up to 50x more refugees than there are today, according to studies, and the thought of how we will respond to this concerns her – a "fortress Europe" which practices "climate racism" by refusing to aid those fleeing ecological crisis. We have already seen anti-refugee stigma around coronavirus risk – things can change very quickly. Mieke ends with a call for Quakers to take a clearer position on a right to migrate (to more open borders).

The next speaker was **David Forbes**, former QCEA Representative. He began by reflecting on his diverse Irish and Jamaican heritage as well as his Scottish wife, and the recent murder of George Floyd. We need to focus on equality in Europe too – our "European Social Charter"

addresses poverty and marginalisation, which are closely interlinked with structural racism. We should promote this and empower the Council of Europe – the EU as well!

Jude-Kirton Darling, another Quaker and former MEP, spoke next. Her presentation focused on social justice, notably the inequalities that the pandemic has exposed and compounded – among people of colour or women who suffer domestic violence, for example. COVID has revealed our failure to address these issues, too – and raised the question of how we do better now, in terms of the environment and social justice. In the UK these questions are particularly pertinent given Brexit.

Many of our front-line workers, including in the care sector, are often in an economically precarious situation, and those we once considered “non-skilled” workers have become vital in lockdown (like delivery drivers). This raises bigger questions of class and how it relates to health and education priorities. As we seek to build a greener economy, we must also work to build a better society too, with “good jobs” and adequate social protection – perhaps even universal basic income schemes fit for the 21st century.

Echoing Molly Scott Cato, Jude was positive about the stimulus proposals mooted by the European Commission, in terms of both scale and focus. It encourages solidarity between and among member states – whether our governments choose to embrace this solidarity represents an “existential” challenge for the EU. Given the colossal economic crisis facing us all, we must stick together or our shared institutions will crumble.

Finally, **Martin Leng**, QCEA’s Communications Coordinator, spoke about what’s happening in Brussels. The EU budget has been rewritten in response to COVID, and the big dilemma is how to reconcile differing perspectives on common debt and public spending among member states. We, as NGOs and citizens, need to be clear that discredited austerity economics must be avoided at all cost. As such, European civil society is more important than ever – even as it faces challenging times.

Even before the coronavirus, there was lots to be concerned about in the EU’s budget proposals – securitisation of asylum policy, opaque funding for the military-industrial complex – and many of these provisions are still present. And the sweeping measures taken to stop the virus often involve massive seizures of power by governments, risking human rights abuses right on our doorstep. In other words, there’s lots of important civil society work to be done.

And yet, the pandemic represents an existential threat to NGOs, as resources and political interest dwindle. We will all need to adapt to recognise the new reality in our work, and to be conscious that opportunities for advocacy which do not address economic reconstruction

may be limited. We should seize the sense of renewed purpose which is in the air, whilst being realistic about difficult times ahead for many of our colleagues.

The floor was then opened to questions and comments.

Q: What did Mieke mean with her suggestion for “open borders”?

A: (from Mieke) It's about a long-term, idealist vision – even if it's not feasible in right now. My passport allows me to move pretty freely, but many people don't have this right. It's about equality, but it's also linked to climate justice: the developed world produces massive emissions and we have a duty of care to those who suffer the consequences.

Q: On the need for a big rethink of how we manage our societies and economies, are Molly and Jude optimistic given their experience in politics?

A: (from Jude) The Commission's proposals are interesting, particularly the industrial policy – making more of what we need locally, in terms of resilience but also favouring local supply chains. The limitations of globalisation have been made clear, and it's exciting that the Commission is reflecting on the sustainability of its political worldview.

People are desperate to get back to normal, but we need to use this moment of disruption to shift as much as we can towards better models. We need to be brave and use this opportunity. For the first time in my experience there is a real sense that there is a joined-up approach in Brussels.

(from Molly) 90% of people said they didn't want things to go back to normal, which shows how widespread the feeling is that “something wasn't right”. There is a huge recession ahead, and if the Eurozone doesn't figure out a way to share debt then it will be a disaster. From an economic point of view, we're right at the beginning of this crisis, with much pain to come. We all need to grasp the scale of this, and embrace the groundswell of feeling which exists to make things better. Even the Financial Times say so now!

To end, QCEA Director **Andrew Lane** spoke about what comes next. He felt inspired by our desire and ability to speak about these big issues. The aim now was to reflect over the next few days and then prepare a summary for those who participated in the call. QCEA will keep its two coronavirus-related pages online (www.QCEA.org/DuringCovid and QCEA.org/AfterCOVID). As well as the work on this matter, we're building on our recent publication on police violence with another specifically addressing videoing police in Europe.

Jeremy Lester brought the meeting to a close, with a summary of the key points and next steps. Andrew Lane explained about how to stay in touch with QCEA and explained how everyone has a representative on the QCEA General Assembly wherever they may live. Jeremy and Andrew finished by thanking those present for taking part.

A group of QCEA General Assembly members will meet now meet in June to consider COVID-19, followed by a QCEA's Executive Committee in July.