Discussion: ACTIVE CITZENSHIP AND CIVIL SOCIETY

> **"Remember your responsibilities as a citizen for the conduct of local, national, and international affairs. Do not shrink from the time and effort your involvement may demand."** *BYM, Advices & Queries*, 34

What is 'Citizenship'?

The terms 'citizen' and 'citizenship' encompass different meanings: first, the term 'citizenship' can be regarded as a *legal concept*, which refers to someone holding a passport from a particular state and enjoying a number of rights in that particular society. Second, 'citizenship' can describe much more than this – a *moral idea* of people actively contributing to the society in which they live. Quakers have always been aware of this second dimension and have thought about their roles as citizens in society:

> **"Do not be content to accept things as they are but keep an alert and questioning mind. Seek to discover the causes of social unrest, injustice and fear; try to discern the new growing-points in social and economic life. Work for an order of society which will allow men and women to develop their capacities and will foster their desire to serve."**
> *BYM Quaker Faith & Practice*, 23.01

> **"…we must be willing, when loyalty to the Kingdom of God demands it, to refuse the demands of the state and show the highest loyalty to the state and the best citizenship by refusing demands that are wrong…"**
> *T Edmund Harvey, 1937, as quoted in BYM Quaker Faith and Practice*, 23.01

These observations point towards some fundamental questions:

- As a citizen, what can I expect from the state and from society?
- Can society *expect* certain forms of action or involvement from me?
- What responsibilities does citizenship entail? What enables me to exercise 'active citizenship'?

Legal Citizenship
What are the rights of European citizens?

In legal terms, the concept of 'European citizenship' was introduced in the Maastricht Treaty in 1993. European citizens have a certain set of rights: the right to vote in local elections in any other EU country in which they are resident; freedom of movement between member states; the transference of social protection and pension rights; entitlement to diplomatic protection and the right to petition. The rights of European citizens were further underlined by the introduction of the European Ombudsman in 1995, to whom complaints concerning EU policy can be addressed.

The rights of European citizenship today apply to anyone who is a citizen of one of the EU member states. This means that these rights do not apply to nationals of third countries living within the EU. There is thus inequality of rights which reinforces discrimination against non-EU citizens resident in the EU. Groups such as the *European Network Against Racism* (ENAR) are therefore campaigning for a new model of citizenship based on residence in the EU and no longer on nationality. They

believe that, if this aim was reached, European citizenship could become a tool in the fight against racism.

In contrast with European citizenship, the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU* applies (for the most part) to both citizens and residents of the EU. This document sets out a wide range of civil political, economic and social rights. However, while the Charter was 'proclaimed' at the Nice Summit in 1999, it is not a legally binding document. The Convention on the Future of Europe now has the task to consider whether this should change and whether the Charter should form part of a future constitutional treaty for the European Union.

Do you feel 'European'? Would you rather be considered an EU citizen or a citizen of your home country?

Active Citizenship
Towards a European Civil Society?

If citizenship is seen as an active combination of involvement, responsibility and concern for the way society is run, this means that citizens should take as much interest in European level issues as in national or local. However, the distance between the EU institutions and citizens is evident, and one of the tasks of the current Convention on the Future of Europe is to attempt to bridge this gap. Steps towards this could include making the EU more open and transparent, providing better information and education for citizens and giving wider scope for active participation in civil society.

'Civil society' is a term that describes the space in which public debate and citizens' activity takes place. Civil society organisations are non-governmental and non-profit-making. This covers a wide range of organisations from campaigning bodies to charitable associations, faith groups and community organisations.

Although not formally involved in decision-making, civil society can play an important role in how society is run. With an understanding of the opinions and values of ordinary individuals, civil society organisations can provide a vital link between governments and citizens.

At the European level, however, the link between the institutions and civil society is problematic. Consultation of civil society has been on an ad hoc basis, with no clear procedures for consultation. The European Commission has taken some steps to improve this situation. Last year's *White Paper on Governance* set out proposals to improve the transparency, efficiency and accountability of the EU without changing the Treaties. While the White Paper shows willingness to engage with civil society, many organisations do not feel it goes far enough. Suggestions from civil society groups include:

- The creation of a Treaty article to provide a legal responsibility for the EU to engage in dialogue with citizens.

- The establishment of official 'consultative status' for NGOs, such as that used by the UN.

To think about:

What role should civil society play in the future of the EU?

Do you feel that the EU is accountable to its citizens?

Are you involved in politics at the European level? If not, what would make it easier for you to get involved?

How can Quakers get more involved in European civil society?