



# Around Europe

Quaker Council for European Affairs

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## QCEA Contributes to a Call for Respect for Human Rights at Council of Europe

The first week in October 2007 saw the 4<sup>th</sup> session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE); at the same time, International NGOs met in Strasbourg in parallel with PACE. QCEA was represented there by Liz Scurfield, Representative and spokesperson on human rights issues for this Quaker NGO.

On the first day of the session, Amnesty International put to all the INGOs meeting in the framework of the Liaison Committee of the INGO Conference its declaration on human rights, the position of women in society, and sexual and reproductive rights. Amnesty announced in this declaration that it supports the right of women to have access to abortion in cases of rape and incest, or where a pregnancy jeopardizes a girl or woman's life or health. This stand, which is supported by most legislators in Europe, is called into question by some religious leaders. QCEA was one of the many INGOs who fully endorsed the position of Amnesty International. The final declaration, which Liz Scurfield helped to draft, states clearly: *The above-mentioned INGOs stand in solidarity with the victims of abuse and violence. We know that many religious persons share Amnesty International's position and will continue to support Amnesty's work. It is with great sadness and with a strong disapproval that we see some religious leaders attacking a position which is based on a genuine and consistent human rights approach.*<sup>1</sup>

On the second day of the session, Liz Scurfield attended the session of the Parliamentary Assembly to hear the address given there by Patriarch Alexy II, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church. In response to a question from

Lord Russell-Johnston, a liberal member of the Assembly from the UK, on the Patriarch's stand on the rights of homosexuals and lesbians, the Patriarch said *that the church had a vocation to respond in love to the suffering of all, including sinners. The church loved sinners despite their sin. As followers of the Orthodox faith, they could not depart from the moral teachings of the Bible and the apostolic tradition. Homosexuality was not the only sin there was also adultery, irresponsible sexual conduct and the sexual exploitation of women.* He went on to say *that there was a great deal of homosexual propaganda which had an influence on young people. In Moscow, there had been a call for a homosexual parade. The church had taken the view that this was propaganda for sin. It was an illness and a distortion of the human personality. Kleptomania could be seen in a similar light, but no one argued that stealing should be advertised. An exception for homosexuality could not be justified, particularly given its influence on the young.*<sup>2</sup>

Liz Scurfield was shocked by the Patriarch's response and by the amount of applause it gained both from the floor of the Parliamentary Assembly and from listeners in the public gallery. She raised the matter with colleagues at the Human Rights Grouping of INGOs that same afternoon. She called for a resolution to be adopted and this was done, calling on

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<sup>1</sup> Italicised text taken from the Council of Europe Website at: <http://www.coe.int/T/E/NGO/Public/AmnestyDecEng.asp#TopOfPage> accessed on 9 October 2007

<sup>2</sup> Italicised text taken from the Verbatim report of the session of 2 October 2007 (10.00 - 13.00) accessed at <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/Records/2007/E/0710021000E.htm> on 9 October 2007



1. *The Patriarch to respect the fundamental rights of lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender persons and avoid words and comparisons which might lead to any form of intolerance against them;*

2. *The Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly to ensure that their programmes of intercultural and inter-religious dialogue are not conducted at the expense of*

<sup>3</sup> Italicised text taken from the Council of Europe website at: [http://www.coe.int/T/E/NGO/Public/Resolution\\_Patriarch\\_021007.asp#TopOfPage](http://www.coe.int/T/E/NGO/Public/Resolution_Patriarch_021007.asp#TopOfPage) accessed on 9 October 2007

*respect for Human Rights, including those of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons.*<sup>3</sup>

What is the message from this? We need to remain extremely vigilant as far as human rights are concerned, even in that bastion of human rights, the Council of Europe. Human rights for certain groups and individuals which we thought had been won, sometimes need to be won again and again. Whatever our political, cultural and religious beliefs, we need to be united in our determination to work for a world where **everyone** enjoys human rights.

## Give Peace a Budget

*Contempt of Conscience*, a superb video illustrating the struggle and motivation for the so-called 'Peace Tax Seven', was shown on 18 September in the European Parliament in Brussels. The event, hosted by MEP Jill Evans, was attended by MEPs Jean Lambert, Ian Houghton, Mikel Irujo Amezaga, Tatjana •danoka, several MEPs' assistants and many members of civil society. Two of the 'Seven', Robin Brookes and Joe Jenkins, were present and spoke to those gathered about their fight.

The Peace Tax Seven, the name by which this group of conscientious objectors is known, are withholding that portion of their taxes that would otherwise go towards military expenditure and demanding that it be used to fund only peaceful purposes. For these seven individuals, the act of financing war is no different from actively participating in war, and as pacifists, they refuse to do so. According to the Peace Tax Seven, 'financial conscription has replaced physical conscription'.

This group, as well as other conscientious objectors, resist paying taxes because they believe that killing other human beings is morally wrong, and that the current tax system, by obliging them to pay taxes destined to fund war, violates a fundamental right to conscientious objection. Though the idea of a Peace Tax is not linked to any specific war, wars such as that currently being waged in Iraq - considered by many to be illegal - is often what causes people to start making the direct connection between their tax money and the financing of war.

The history of conscientious objection in Britain goes back to the Military Service Act of 1916, when over 16,000 men claimed the right to

exemption from military service. They were followed by 60,000 conscientious objectors in the Second World War. Objection to financial conscription through taxes began later, particularly during the Vietnam War, as warfare began to depend more and more heavily on expensive technology instead of human bodies.

In 1983 tax resister Tony Croft worked to have his case heard at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, under Article 9, paragraph 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which reads:

*Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.*

The hearing was denied on the basis that there had been no interference with Croft's rights. The coming into force of the Human Rights Act in Great Britain in 2000 gives 'greater effect' to the rights listed in the Convention on Human Rights, particularly in that: 'As far as possible the courts in this country should interpret the law in a way that is compatible with Convention rights',<sup>1</sup> including the freedom of conscience.

Having exhausted all avenues within the British legal system, the Peace Tax Seven have already begun the proceedings to finally have the case for a Peace Tax heard at the European Court of Human Rights. Hopefully this group of committed individuals will succeed in changing the world.

**Sophie Miller**

<sup>1</sup> [www.yourrights.org.uk](http://www.yourrights.org.uk)

## Is Diplomacy Dead? Notes from a Controversial Conference on Peace in the Middle East

The European Parliament hosted a UN International Conference of Civil Society in Support of Israeli-Palestinian Peace on 30-31 August 2007. This was arranged under the auspices of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, a committee of the UN which was formed in 1975 by resolution 3376 (XXX) of the General Assembly. As such, it is a committee that has significant international standing, or should have.

Despite this, there had been some significant pressure on the European Parliament not to allow this event to happen; there was also pressure on the organisers and those considering participation not to be part of something which was branded as 'anti-semitic' in some of the press. Both this sense of external pressure and the very much heightened security in the European Parliament gave the event a certain 'frisson'.

As with so many conferences, however, the maxim 'less is more' was all but forgotten. The more than 300 people present had little chance to contribute to the discussion and were probably overloaded with information. Most of the speeches were available on paper, too, but not so the visual presentations, notably the ones given by Waseem Khazmo of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Raymond Dolphin of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), both of which made the current situation real for those participants who had not seen it first-hand; their input was one of the most worthwhile elements of the two days.

It may also be interesting to note that (according to the list of participants registered) among the 300 plus participants there were diplomats from fifty-four countries - but only five EU countries were officially represented: Belgium, Bulgaria, Greece, Malta and Slovenia. The European Commission was represented at desk officer level with two people and the General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union was entirely absent.

It is, of course, neither possible nor useful to reflect on everything that was said here; but

what I want to do is to highlight some of the key points which came out of the presentations:

1. Diplomacy is dead in the Middle East - this was said again and again; the political and diplomatic structures have all lost credibility to such an extent that only civil society action can now achieve anything.
2. The situation is far worse than it was prior to the Oslo agreement - and what was intended in the Oslo agreement to be a temporary situation has been made permanent to all intents and purposes. And the Oslo agreement was not kind to the Palestinians. The current West Bank and Gaza represents twenty-two per cent of historic Palestine; the number of settlers doubled between 1993 and 1999; eighty per cent of the Wall is inside the West Bank; the connection between Ramallah, East Jerusalem and Bethlehem - a critical part of the Palestinian economy which accounts for thirty-five per cent of the economy - is completely interrupted by the Wall, the settlements and the roads.
3. The situation in the region is one of de-facto 'apartheid' - it was suggested by some speakers that it is worse than it ever was in South Africa because in the occupied territories even the roads are subject to apartheid.
4. The Wall is contrary to international law and must go; the failure of the international community to do anything constructive about the implementation of the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in this regard is a significant part of the worsening of the problems.
5. Gaza is effectively an 'open-air detention centre'; people cannot get in and cannot get out. There was at least one speaker from a Gaza-based NGO who had intended to make a presentation to the conference but was not allowed out of Gaza and thus unable to attend. A statement by him was read out which included reference to the fact that because his family happens to be in Egypt at this point, he has not been able to see his wife and children for months.
6. The call from the speakers and others at the conference again and again was: 'boycott, (See page 4)



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disinvest, and apply targeted sanctions'. This is a request from the people of Palestine, from civil society. Not unlike the situation in South Africa under apartheid, once this call comes from the people suffering under this situation, we do well to hear it.

7. The two-state solution is not going to be viable because of the destruction of the territorial integrity and the economic viability of the occupied territories through the settlement developments, the road-building programme and the construction of the Wall.

Most of the speakers were not clearly identified with one side or the other in the conflict. There was eloquent testimony from a number of Jewish groups who do not want to be implicated in what is happening in Israel and Palestine and who want the Israeli government to start accepting international law.

As is often the case with such conferences, there was no tangible outcome: no statement was agreed, no demonstration took place, and no action plan drawn up. That said, I do not think the exercise of the conference was futile. It should and does remind us of the fact that if there is one current conflict in the world which we cannot leave to the politicians and diplomats to solve, than the Middle East is it. Maybe from now on we must ask ourselves each day: what am I contributing to the Middle East conflict - by my decisions about what I buy, where I put my money, and what I say; and what can I do to contribute more to peace - by asking questions, by challenging the investment decisions of organisations which I belong to, by demanding from my government that they at least contribute to the implementation of the advisory opinion of the ICJ.

**Martina Weitsch**

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