
Slow motion: *Barbara Forbes* on the need for behind-the-scenes activism

‘What would our Yearly Meeting feel like if we were no longer able to sustain this work?’

Recent activities at the Defence and Security Equipment International (DSEI) arms fair showed Quaker commitment at its best, with consequences ranging from inconvenience and discomfort to loss of liberty. But we don't so often hear about other kinds of commitment – in particular the steady behind-the-scenes work that has traditionally been our way of 'speaking truth to power'. As a trustee of Quaker Concern for the Abolition of Torture (Q-CAT) I fear that this work is at risk – frustrating and slow compared to the adrenalin of public protest.

During my visits to Spain for the Holy Week processions, I am struck by the humility and anonymity of the thousands of people who, having spent months in preparation, walk through the streets for hours, masked or hidden under their heavy floats. This is in sharp contrast to the reports of specific, named Friends and their actions. Are we elevating the individual above the group, allowing uninvolved Friends to bask in the warm glow of someone else's public commitment?

At Area Meeting it is now a struggle to find people to serve on committees. In the largest Area Meeting in the country, only around seventeen per cent of members and attenders are actively involved at that level. Of the remaining eighty-three per cent, some do play an essential role in their Local Meetings; but I fear that for many others Sunday morning is the sum total of their commitment.

At Q-CAT, our future is precarious. It was set up in 2004 to carry the concern about torture on behalf of Yearly Meeting, which had stated that torture is 'a profound evil, causing unimaginable human suffering and corrupting the spiritual and political life of the human family'. The work is not glamorous or exciting. It involves unpleasant knowledge, and trying to raise awareness and encourage Friends to join our patient letter-writing. Sometimes one feels that all we are doing is holding back an inexorable tide.

What would our Yearly Meeting feel like if we were no longer able to sustain this work? Torture diminishes us all, and the collusion of a series of UK governments – and their stubborn ignoring of the UN Committee Against Torture – should make us all ashamed. There are also many other small Quaker groups working on unglamorous concerns and struggling to engage enough people. Is it an indictment of our broader complacency that any active concern for these issues is being carried by only a handful of trustees? Are we so seduced by public action that we are reluctant to take part in the essential quiet teamwork which rarely shows instant results? Without it the world would be lurching even faster into its downward spiral. Do we want to be a loose network of high-profile activists, or a supportive community from which we can challenge the evil all around us in 'this thick night of darkness'? ●

Barbara is from Central England Area Meeting.