

A Quaker Declaration for Equality and the Common Good - our explanation and supporting evidence.

This explanation and supporting evidence, which accompanies our Declaration, grows out of observations of recent changes in our society and consideration of some of the published research on the conditions experienced by many. It looks at the impact of these changes on the most vulnerable, now and in the likely future.

In structuring our Declaration, we have drawn on a 'modern English paraphrase' of Margaret Fell's 1660 'Declaration and Information from Us, the People Called Quakers', produced by Stuart Masters and published in The Friend in the Autumn of 2015. (www.thefriend.org). Margaret Fell's original letter can be found at www.qhpress.org/quakerpages/qwhp/mf2king.htm.

Our Declaration and the planned ride to London builds on 'The Barrow Pilgrimage'. In Easter week 2016, Quakers from the Kendal and Sedbergh Area Meeting walked more than fifty-five miles over four days from Brigflatts Quaker Meeting House to Barrow Town Hall, where a silent witness was held. 'The Pilgrimage' was undertaken in response to concerns about the dismantling of the Welfare State, particularly changes to the benefits system and their impact on the most vulnerable in our society. We believe these changes challenge our Testimonies of equality and justice and of peace.

The Language and style of the Declaration

In writing our Declaration we have sought to reflect the active spirit that is embodied in Margaret Fell's words and her direct style. We have drawn on some of her ideas and language, such as the concern with stigmatisation and persecution and in places employed the same words and phrases, such as 'the good of all', 'not bow to...', 'fruits are...manifest'. Perhaps tellingly, we have been able to echo a period of eight years of changes and their impact on people.

We have also drawn on Quaker thought and literature including, Quaker Faith and Practice. (Fifth Edition 2010-2013) as well as the Quaker vision for the economic future e.g. Ten Principles for the New Economy, (www.quaker.org.uk/our-work/economic-justice/new-economy). In almost all cases in our Declaration, where words are in quotation marks, they have been taken directly from Margaret Fell's Declaration. The reference to the "tender hand" is from Quaker Faith and Practice 10.01.

Supporting our beliefs – some evidence

In the section of the Declaration '**A warning about persecution**' we caution government, as did Margaret Fell, to act justly and with mercy and to prevent the persecution of innocent people as such actions diminish us all. Here we offer examples of the ways in which some government policies seem to have re-orientated structures, powers and resources to enrich those who already have economic wealth and to disempower and penalise those who are without it.

We have noticed people with disabilities stigmatised and denied the support once more readily given.

- The United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, looking at the UK, has described our government's actions as "grave and systemic violations" of the rights of disabled people. (October, 2016 CRPD/c/15/R.2/Rev/1)
Around one million recipients of disability payments have had their benefit eligibility reassessed, often reduced and sometimes re-established on appeal after a traumatic process.
- 590 suicides have been linked to the impact of this process and to the loss of benefit between 2010-2013. (BMJ/Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health 2015 – "First do no harm" are disability assessments associated with adverse trends in mental health? University of Liverpool, Department of Public Health. <https://jech.bmj.com/content/early/2015/10/26/jech-2015-206209>).
Such a suicide is that of Michael O'Sullivan, who killed himself after being found fit for work by disability assessors, despite the reports to the contrary from 3 doctors. The North London Coroner, Mary Hassell, while accepting that anxiety and depression were long term problems, identified that the intense anxiety which led to the suicide was triggered by the disability assessment process and its conclusion. She issued a Prevention of Death notice to the DWP to this effect. (<https://www.judiciary.gov.uk/publications/michael-osullivan>. 13th January 2014 ref-2014-2012)
- In surveys 2,700 parents of disabled children have reported experiencing on line and face to face abuse of their children and 30% of adults polled by the Leonard Cheshire Disability Charity have experienced hostile behaviour, which has reduced their confidence in accessing the world beyond their homes. (surveys reported on www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-41600131 and www.independent.co.uk/News/UK/Home/News)

People are coerced by hunger into the charitable arms of food banks.

- Foodbanks in areas, where there has been a full roll out of Universal Credit, have seen a 16.85% rise in referrals, which is more than double the national average rise of 6.64% (Report produced by the Trussell Trust, who run 425 of the nation's foodbanks. Early Warnings. Universal Credit and Foodbanks. Jitendra, Thorogood and Hadfield-Spoor www.trusselltrust.org. 2017)
- The Trussell Trust also reports that they gave out over 1,000,000, three-day emergency food supplies to people in crisis. 436,000 children were amongst those receiving these in one year. (Trussell Trust end of year data April 2016-March 2017)
- Half of the children receiving food parcels from the Summer Food Banks were of primary school age (Trussell Trust 2017)
- A "robust link" has been made between increases in the numbers of benefit sanctions handed out and rising numbers of adults receiving food parcels. (Rachel Loopstra - lead author, University of Oxford study. www.ox.ac.uk/2016-10-27-strong-link-between-increased-benefits-sanctions-and-higher-foodbank-use.)
- The Office of Budget Responsibility notes that the incomes of the poorest fifth of the population will fall in the next five years threatening their ability to pay for essentials including food.

- Two thirds of English councils are closing or cutting their emergency funds previously used to meet hardship requests from families on low incomes. In social care 90% of councils are now only able to respond to people with critical and substantial needs. This contrasts with 47% in 2007 (Distinctive, valued, personal. Why social care matters. The next five years. Directors of Adult Social Services (Adass, March 2016)
- A decline in the value of wages in the UK has been the largest of all developed countries except for Greece, Mexico and Portugal. (This is highlighted in the Interim Report of the IPPR Commission for Economic Justice - A New Vision for the British Economy, 2017)

People in mental anguish struggle to navigate tracts of bureaucracy for the means to survive, only to fail and sometimes die alone and in distress.

- Disability re-assessment documents and processes - complex and for many traumatic. (MIND briefings on Mental Health Problems and Benefits Re-assessments - October 2017 and “one in two people with mental health problems have felt suicidal...” 07/04/2016 www.mind.org.uk) (Independent review of PIP by Paul Gray, Chair of the Social Security Advisory Committee, as reported in The Guardian www.theguardian.com/society2015/jan27)
- Death of claimants following “fit for work” rulings – 2380 deaths between 2011 and 2014. (Department of Work and Pensions data reported at www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-34074557). In 2013 Mark Wood died, weighing under 6 stones, as he struggled to live on £40 per week following cuts in his benefit, despite intervention by his GP. (reported widely, including at www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-oxfordshire-30346414)

People sleep in doorways speaking of being invisible and no longer considered ‘human’.

- Growth of doorway cardboard box and tent community living in towns and cities. (e.g. A doubling of the number of rough sleepers in London over five years - Department of Communities and Local Government data reported in The Guardian, January, 2016.)
- Lack of planning for the link between welfare changes and homelessness. “Government has not evaluated the impact of its welfare reforms on homelessness”. There has been a 60% increase of households in temporary accommodation since 2011. (National Audit Office report. Homelessness - September 2017 www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Homelessness.pdf)
- Failure to build houses in line with population changes. “Even if a million homes were built during this Parliament... that would be enough merely to slow but not stop the widening of the gap between supply and demand”. p 36, Faith in Politics - The 2017 Swarthmore Lecture, Catherine West and Andy Hull, Quaker Books, referenced from K.Schmuecker, The good, the bad and the ugly: Housing demand 2025 – Institute for Public Policy Research 2011)
- Delays in benefit payments leading to debt, rent arrears and possible eviction. (Universal Credit: the problem of delay in benefit payments. Carl Packham, TUC, 2014)
- Transfer of focus from building social housing for a manageable rent to building “starter” homes for purchase, thereby failing to meet the needs of the full range of people in our society.

- A sense of a “broken housing market” (Joseph Rowntree Foundation response to the Housing White paper 2017 identifies a situation where 40% of renters (3.4 million households) spend more than a third of income on rent. JRF calls for the creation of “living rents”).

Children are exposed to the precariousness of poverty.

- 5.1 million children are forecast to be living in poverty by 2020 due to the changes resulting from the universal credit system. (Institute of Fiscal Studies quoted by Polly Toynbee in The Guardian, 4.4.2017)
- Despite a 4% increase in the National Living Wage families earning this wage saw their net income rise more slowly than minimum costs of living. (Joseph Rowntree Foundation noting 2017 A Minimum Income Standard for the UK - Centre for Research in Social Policy - Loughborough University)
- 23% of the population – including 6 million workers who are earning less than the living wage. (Living Wage Foundation and KPMG studies 2015)
- A link is confirmed between persistently low earnings or persistent worklessness and the amounts of persistent child poverty. (Living Standards, Poverty and Inequality Summary-Institute for Fiscal Studies July 2017. www.ifs.org.uk/publications/9540)
- 89% of Directors of Children’s Services report that they are finding it increasingly difficult to fulfil their legal duties to children who need support. (Survey by the National Children’s Bureau: No good options. Report of the Inquiry into Children’s Social Care in England. March 2017)
- “Nearly a quarter of poor children live in the 10% most deprived areas of Britain.” (Noted in the Institute for Fiscal studies report: Living Standards, Poverty and Inequality – The “Geography of Inequality” section July 2017)
- In a NAS/UWT, survey a quarter of teachers report that some children they teach have lost their homes during the last school year. In another study, 55% of teachers reported on the impact of poverty and financial concerns on children’s mental health. (Schools need support to deal with the mental health upsurge – NAS/UWT July 2017 www.nasuwt.org.uk.)

As Quakers we value the right of everyone to be able to contribute to society and to live in conditions which enable them to do so. Attention to equality must influence all our personal and corporate behaviour.

“What is important is that institutions and their administration be constantly tested against human values and that those who are concerned about these values be prepared to grapple with the complex realities of modern society as it is” (Quaker Faith and Practice 23.47)

Developing a New Economy to work for the common good

“When the whole public realm and common good is not safeguarded and renewed, social and economic injustices usher in unrest”.

The Declaration is underpinned by a need for a new economic model and a changed approach to the Welfare State. It asks government to work towards an economy where equality is a

driving force, not one where the UK is described as the most unequal society in Western Europe. (IPPR Commission on Economic Justice – Interim Report. September, 2017)

A new economic model is required to support a humane and equal society. The principles for such an economy are outlined in Ten Principles of the New Economy, developed by the Quaker Peace and Social Witness New Economy Project. www.Quaker.org.uk.

We need government policy to move us away from an economy dependent on low income, low security and low skilled forms of employment to one which builds on our technological, digital, creative and financial talents as a nation. We need to create an innovative, sustainable market, less dependent on consumer spending and spiralling personal debt. We need an economy where there is an effective partnership between those talented in business, the financial sector, universities and trade unions.

We ask government to recognise that the peace and balance of our society are dependent on public services. We request that it is accepted as a basic tenet of government that secure housing, healthcare, food, water, energy and education are essentials in our society. These should not be dependent on whether people can afford them. We reject the falsehood that we cannot afford to care.

We also request a re-examination of our tax system to ensure that it no longer fails to redistribute wealth from the richest to the poorest in our society. We see the need for a change in attitude towards income tax. It should not be regarded by some as a form of theft but the necessary price of a civilised society. We ask for an end to the double standard which allows some large international corporations not to pay their tax in full and has difficulty tackling VAT avoidance while, at the same time, demonising the recipients of benefits.

We recognise the need to tighten the regulation of our banks to promote lower risk and support the creation of a more ethical banking culture. We need to diversify the banking system by further encouraging the development of local exchange systems and credit unions. Our faith and lived experience feed our understanding that such changes will lead to a more participative, peaceful and equal society.

As Quakers we cannot turn away from these issues. We are required to “bear witness to the humanity of all people” and to ask ourselves:

“Are you working towards the removal of social injustices? Have you attempted to examine their causes objectively and are you ready to abandon old prejudices and think again?”
(Quaker Faith and Practice 23.19)

Drafted by the For Equality and the Common Good “Ride” for Welfare Group
and Sedbergh Area Meeting

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