

Quaker Truth and Integrity Group Talk at the SVP National Meeting

Good afternoon. My name is Gerald Hewitson and my colleague is Anne Wilkinson. We're here to talk about the Quaker Truth and Integrity Group - who we are, what we do, and why we do it. What I have to say needs to covers a bit of Quaker history, a touch of Quaker theology, and a lot of ground.

Firstly, as it says on the tin, we are Quakers. Quakers were founded in the seventeenth century, out of the social, intellectual and spiritual ferment following the Civil War. We were called a peculiar people.

Three things that are peculiar about us:

- We have a priesthood of all believers, so no nominated clergy
- In the British tradition of Quakers, we gather to worship in silence, out of which anyone can be led to minister by an inward calling
- This calling to minister is often accompanied by physical symptoms of discomfort, hence the term **Quake** - r

Today we number about 18,000, with a central administrative body located in Friends House in London, opposite Euston (superb restaurant, by the way)

So who are we, the Truth and Integrity Group?

We are part of a wider Quaker commitment to truth and integrity, but as a small group of volunteer Quakers - formed three years ago - we are recognised by our religious community as having a special concern for Truth and Integrity in public life.

One more bit of information as a building block for understanding our work. Every year at the AGM of Quakers called Yearly Meeting, there is a Swarthmore Lecture - usually published and available thereafter. Our work is framed by two of these lectures.

In 1974, Wolf Mendl gave a lecture called Prophets and Reconcilers: in it he spoke of Quakers as trying to resolve the tension between bringing people together, or condemning what we see. At QTIG we live in that tension.

From the outset, we knew we had a duty toward our history as Quakers of promoting reconciliation. At the very beginning we decided we were not trying to find where people fall short, but our role was to

nourish nuggets of truth and celebrate integrity wherever we find it. In this work we are looking for ‘kinder ground’, an inspiring phrase from Thomas Penny’s 2022 Swarthmore Lecture. Thomas Penny took this metaphor from the shepherd, moving the sheep from the harsh bleak winter mountain top to the kinder ground of the valley. The sense is that, as reconcilers, we need to try and move politics to the kinder ground where truth might be found.

So what do we do as reconcilers?

Firstly, we write letters of appreciation when we see examples of integrity. The recipients of the letters are wide ranging in public life - MPs, advisers, members of the House of Lords, Alan Bates and Sue Carr, the Lady Chief Justice. We don’t expect such people be saints. On a different occasion, they may well disappoint us. But on that occasion they represented truth.

We also issue a Truth and Integrity Award. Last year it was to Carol Cadwallader for her campaigning journalism. This year we are still working through the nominations we have received for 2024.

Still within the role of reconcilers, we’ve organised seminars with our Quaker study centre called Woodbrooke, in which we spoke to different faiths and churches. We also organised a seminar bringing three politicians together from across the political spectrum. When we spoke to these three backbench MPs we found them deeply concerned to help their constituents and make their lives better. We could see they exemplified the Nolan Principles.

What are the Nolan Principles? In 1995, under the then Prime Minister John Major, Lord Nolan laid down seven principles of public service. Those principles are: selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.

But the national picture has been very different hasn’t it? Instead of these principles being embedded in public life, the last few years have seen:

- a) Politicians using their political position for personal aggrandisement or rewarding cronies.
- b) Politicians engaging in systematic and sustained lying.

- c) Politicians refusing to be brought to account and if finally found responsible of malfeasance, attempting to change the rules and systems to which they were accountable

These not simply the failings of individuals, but are a fundamental threat to democracy itself - surveys indicate that trust in politicians is at an all-time low. And that the young are suspicious of democracy and can see virtue in strong leaders

In such a political lacuna, there is space for exploitation by disrupters, those seeking to undermine rules, batter structures of accountability, and damage expectations of due impartiality

One Quaker Friend Jessica Metheringham sums it up well when she says:

The political world includes people who spread outright lies and misinformation, and who thrive on the chaos they create. There is a difference between those with whom we disagree honestly, and those who act in bad faith.

Bad faith people, allied to malign media - and more recently social media, with its business model promoting division and rewarding anger - can use democratic norms to project authoritarian, populist leaders into power: think Oban and Erdogan, Modi and Trump. In his book *The Age of the Strong Man*, Gideon Rachman of the Financial Times, lists then Prime Minister Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson alongside these people. A British Prime Minister, linked with such people!

I want to stress that it is not undermining the concept of kinder ground to state these things clearly. Rather it is our prophetic responsibility -

"Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.

QTIG is unashamedly an intensely political project. Along with the Quaker Edmund Burroughs (who said in 1659 "We are not for one party, or against others"). We eschew party politics. But we are utterly committed to the political process of parliamentary democracy and what it can effect.

Why? Why democracy? Given that for most of history most human beings have lived their existence under the dominion of an empire rather than the open sky of universal suffrage, why should we be precious about what we currently have?

Speaking as a Quakers, equality is a strand in our DNA, and only a fully working democracy promises one person one vote and equality before the law. Also, as Quakers, we hold that every single person carries the sacred within them, and it is liberal democracy which undertakes to value each individual, and respect their personhood.

Whatever our tradition, our collective work depends on liberal democracy. The lobbying work you do in SVP on behalf of the poor, of refugees and asylum seekers and those imprisoned is founded upon our liberal democracy: in a liberal democracy we assume that facts may well be subject to interpretation, but there are no ‘alternative facts’ that makes black white, or dogs cats. In a liberal democracy, we are free to lobby our parliamentarians, placing facts before them, with the expectation that government action will be based on evidence not ideology. Part of kinder ground is recognising that increasingly the work of an MP will be challenging, with personal security a perturbing and unsettling of their experience. But equally we expect our MPs to respond to their electorate, or lose office.

And surely our hope is that engagement with politics can make the world a better place. The Irish journalist Fintan O’Toole, writing about the Good Friday agreement, which brought peace to a troubled land, said:

*It showed that politics can work...”, consciously choosing, as it did,
“generosity, compromise and reconciliation.”*

In contrast with autocracy, these features - generosity, compromise and reconciliation - are the characteristics of a mature democracy at its finest. We want to nurture such a democracy, providing not just for today, but for our children’s children tomorrow. Unfortunately, just like climate change, the erosion of democracy can be a long term process culminating in a crisis.

A change of government, if it comes about, will not mean that we can become more relaxed about truth and integrity; our focus must on

their continued preservation and enhancement for the health of our public life and the continued assurance of our democracy.

And here is where we can link forces. As I said earlier, part of our work has been holding seminars with other faiths and other churches to see where we can work together. Can we work with you?

- Are there points in what I've said which resonate with you, personally?
- Are there points where the work of SVP and QTIG overlap?
- Are there ways in which we begin to forge networks and relationships that would allow us to work more closely together?
- What is the simplest and easiest step to enable that to happen?