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ANNE BENNETT JOURNAL LETTER No 1 NOVEMBER 2004

Dear Friends,

This period has involved settling into the house (including sorting out my accommodation and tidying the garden); reading a vast range of newspapers; reports produced by Quaker House and others; attending a number of conferences and gatherings to familiarise myself with the current situation in Northern Ireland and meeting with people who have provided me with a deeper understanding of the political, social, economic strands within the Province. All of this has been against a backdrop of waiting for the telephone call to let me know that my long-expected first grandchild was on the way. There were a number of false alarms but Grace arrived on 6th October and mother and baby are well.

Returning to a place where one has lived in the past is always a strange experience. To know and be known is an advantage but also a disadvantage, for places, like people, move on. However, it has been a great advantage to have past experience of living and working in Northern Ireland and I feel that this has eased me into the work. Local Quakers have provided me with enormous support, as have a number of friends with whom I worked in the past. I have followed up suggested contacts and have felt, at times, like a vacuum cleaner, hoovering up everyone's thoughts and ideas about the present situation and possible outcomes. All my meetings with individuals have tended to concentrate on what they do, how they see the situation in Northern Ireland and any thoughts they have on the way forward for the work of Quaker House. These questions have led to some interesting responses.

Many things have changed. Belfast and the areas I have visited look much more prosperous on the surface although I realise that some of this is skin deep. Cash machines dispense and telephone boxes accept Euros and there has been a significant increase in cross border trade. I have been amazed at the number of community groups addressing so many of the issues of local concern. The long-term funding of these groups may be worrying but the level of involvement at grass-roots is impressive. There has been an influx of individuals and groups. There are many more languages to be heard on the streets and people from ethnic minorities are much more visible.

These positive changes have to be set against other events that continue unabated, like the criticisms in some quarters of the new policing body and other attempts to 'normalise' the Province. Listening to and reading comments on the round of discussions at Leeds Castle and Stormont, so much sounded the same. Some commentators suggest that the voters would 'block' any radical proposals while others indicate that both the 'catholic' and 'protestant' middle class have opted out of the

process. The number of integrated schools continue to increase but still remain at about 6% of the total provision. I have been reading the comments on the desire to produce an Irish language prospectus at Queens University. This appears to have sparked a big debate, which included counter-demands to produce one in Ulster Scots; to reject this proposal; and a comment that there were more native Cantonese/Mandarin speakers at Queens than native Irish speakers. The report by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive indicated that in 2000 it spent £6 million on its emergency re-housing scheme while in the past year it was £45million. Sectarianism, the need to rehouse members of the security services whose details were compromised by security leaks and paramilitary feuding were the cause of the majority of cases although 30 families were subject to racial intimidation.

There has been a considerable increase in the numbers of reported racist attacks and concern about heightened racial tension runs through people's comments. The building of a Chinese Community Centre in Donegall Pass was blocked by local residents who expressed a fear that their community would be affected by this proposal. Talking with a prominent Muslim confirmed that they too were experiencing attacks, only felt safe when living in certain areas and mentioned in passing that verbal abuse was normal. Drug use has been on the increase and 'controlled' by groups within the communities. The new Police Authority struggles, as do police in other parts of the UK, with this rising problem, anti social behaviour and the increasing use of guns and knives on the streets. There appears to have been an increase in the separation of the two communities, especially in working class areas. There appears to have been a reduction in the number of 'mixed areas' and people say that they feel safer when living among their own. Talking with a church minister living and working in a Protestant enclave, he noted that 15 years ago young people in his area had never met a Catholic but would have wanted to do so. Now, the young people have never met a Catholic and have no desire to do so.

The prospects of employment for those who have achieved academic success have improved considerably and fewer graduates seem to feel that they will have to 'emigrate'. However, many opt to go to other parts of the UK to study for their degree and my impression is that as in the past, many do not return. Against these figures is the data that suggests that only about 2% of young people from poorer areas go on to tertiary education and the employment opportunities are much reduced.

The Peace Process moves forward slowly and the two largest parties, the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Fein address the issues, while being aware of the expectations of their supporters and the pressure from both the UK and Irish Prime Ministers to reach a conclusion. The way to a resolution will involve compromise and trust on all sides – not easy to achieve given the long history of Northern Ireland.

It has been a fascinating time to return to Northern Ireland and no doubt there are interesting days ahead. I wish you well and look forward to your comments and thoughts about the work.

Yours in Peace

Anne Bennett