



Quaker House Belfast

Quaker House, 7 University Avenue, Belfast, BT7 1GX

Anne Bennett
Quaker Representative
Tel./Fax: 028-9024 9293
E-mail: quaker.house@ntlworld.com

ANNE BENNETT JOURNAL LETTER NO. 2 FEBRUARY 2005

Dear Friends,

When I wrote my last Journal Letter, there was a sense of cautious optimism (tempered by a strong dose of cynicism) that the two governments and the two largest parties might be able to take the peace process forward. What a difference a few days make! A refusal to allow photographs to be taken of the destruction of the IRA armaments, some incautious words and a high profile bank raid and the scene in the New Year looked quite different! Now there is the suggestion that some form of direct rule will continue until at least the end of 2005 and probably into 2006.

It has been interesting to explore the changing nature of the political, social and economic scene in Northern Ireland and ways in which it relates to Britain, Ireland and Europe. Northern Ireland, like all societies, can be viewed on many different levels but many of my impressions in these first few months seem to be around the concepts of 'gain' and 'loss' and how the individuals/communities deal with these.

One change that seems to be emerging relates to policies that appear to be bringing Northern Ireland in line with other parts of the UK. I sense that the UK government, while in the past willing to under write the costs of NI in order to maintain stability, is not prepared to continue. In comparison with other parts of the UK there are larger numbers employed in the public sector. The number of school, hospital and social services boards/trusts are high for the population of the Province and the layers (even duplication) of government departments are being questioned.* It seems that the whole cost of maintaining the status quo is under review. Several observers have suggested that the Treasury is beginning to impose controls on spending in a number of areas e.g. education. The proposal to introduce water rates etc may also imply that there might be a process in place to reduce the levels of subsidy, to control spending and to ensure that its citizens cover the 'real' costs of NI.

Alongside these facts and figures are the people who are devoting themselves to creating a society for their children and grandchildren that will not repeat the patterns of the past. There are many individuals and small groups working on peace and peace-related activities which encompass the two communities and now, increasingly, the immigrant population. This group has been subject to vicious racist attacks, (earning Belfast the dubious newspaper title of 'most racist city in Europe') yet the majority are in Northern Ireland legally, many on short term contracts, contributing to the economy of the Province and hoping to return to their homes in Eastern Europe, Africa and South America with money to improve the lives of their families. As someone commented ' we asked for workers and they sent us people'. The papers in January have told of the story of a young woman

*These include twelve government departments, many agencies, representation at Westminster, an Assembly, 26 local authorities and 30,000 civil servants with responsibilities for a population of 1.7 Million.

from the Ukraine who had been employed in a factory and the work came to an end just before Christmas. The company offered to pay her fare home, but she wanted to stay in order to try to find more work. She spoke no English and having become separated from her friends she slept rough over the Christmas period in freezing temperatures and snow. When she was found, she was admitted to hospital with hypothermia and frost bite – resulting in the amputation of both legs. There have been many discussions about how this happened and the community's responsibility for immigrant workers.

My life at Quaker House is beginning to settle into a pattern of meetings, visits, reading and listening. Many of the traditional areas of work carried out by Quaker House in the past are no longer needed or are being addressed by other organisations. My work in the last few months has been to ascertain what others are doing and to try to identify any 'gaps' that might be filled by Quaker House. Northern Ireland has made large steps forward in recent years and the shared space at work, in leisure and commercial areas is much more open, but people mix in these settings, often alongside each other rather than anything deeper, then return to their separate spaces to live, socialise, worship etc. Parallel communities will not, in the long run, provide the answer for Northern Ireland.

Society polarised during 'the troubles' for safety reasons, but this continues and sectarianism, racism and homophobia emerge from just below the surface when people feel that their personal space or values are threatened. The middle ground appears to have diminished and there is the possibility of working in this area, exploring what could be done and helping people to 'vision' a future for themselves and their families. To envisage the future one has to have addressed the past and this is another area on which I am working, especially as it relates to bringing together individuals and groups from different conflicts. In reflecting on the experiences of others it is often possible to have greater insights on one's own. Another strand to my work involves building links with cross community, church, interfaith and other faiths in order to support the work on anti racism. I hope to give you more details of this work in my next journal letter.

As we approach the middle of February, the dark long days of January are giving way to spring sunshine and a profusion of bulbs in bloom. The trees in the Quaker House garden are showing tentative signs of blossom and the birds crowd the branches as they wait for an opportunity to eat from the neighbour's bird table – closely guarded by her cats.

My best wishes to you for 2005 and until my next journal letter I wish you well with all your activities

Yours in Peace

Anne