



Quaker House Belfast

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Dear Friends - greetings from Belfast,

Several weeks of frenetic activity and then it was over. The posters have mostly been removed, the results declared, another General Election past and life moves on. Political commentators continue to pick over the bones of the results and declare that they were right, whatever it was that they said. Some of the Northern Irish MPs will, as in the past, refuse to take their seats at Westminster; all will tell Tony Blair what they think and the arrival of Peter Hain has led to numerous comments about a part-time Secretary of State.

Although the voting was on the same day as in the rest of the UK, the counting did not start until 9.0 am the following day. Given that the parties in Northern Ireland are not the same as in England and with a total of only 18 seats, unlikely to affect the balance of power, the outcomes probably were of greater interest locally than nationally. One consequence of the Good Friday Agreement is that although it was intended to move beyond sectarianism, it has been built into the political system and as in the past, leads to fairly predictable voting patterns. The battles for the balance of power were not between the loyalists and nationalists but between the parties within those divisions. There was some tactical voting, mostly in constituencies to prevent the least preferred candidate from getting the seat, but this was not common.

The total number of DUP and UUP votes cast at the Westminster election was 369,170. The total Sinn Fein and SDLP vote was 300,156. A number of the 18 seats 'changed' hands but the total allocation of seats at the end of the election were:

	2001	2005
Democratic Unionist Party	5	9
Sinn Fein	4	5
Social Democratic Labour Party	3	3
Ulster Unionist Party	6	1

There has been a wide range of interpretations of the results including David Trimble (now the ex leader of the UUP who lost his seat) who commented that the DUP had been elected not to drive a hard bargain but to block Sinn Fein ministers from gaining power in the near future; and that Sinn Fein had been elected with the expectation that it would be unlikely to concede enough to be able to enter into government with unionists. It would seem that there is still a long way to go!

The Westminster and local council elections were on the same day and it seems, overall, that the voting patterns for local councils reflected those for Westminster, with a few local exceptions. Given the continuation of Direct Rule, these councils are important but they face huge changes if the proposed alterations to local administration are accepted. In the meantime, many questions have been raised about these councils, not only about their use of power and the way that services are delivered but also about spending patterns, for according to local figures many have overspent and six, to the tune of over £20 million each.

Taking the opportunity to meet, talk and listen to people I meet in the street, on buses, meetings and gatherings, increases my knowledge of the spectrum of attitudes and philosophies of those living in Northern Ireland. Some of the problems are the same as those faced by people elsewhere and focus on poverty, educational and employment opportunities, health care, housing, transport etc while others relate to the situation in NI, such as the levels of fear caused by paramilitary intimidation. Another story was about a women's group given disposable cameras and asked to take photos of Peace. Apparently they found this very difficult – so many images they could have photographed about Conflict but there was a sense of confusion about how they should photo Peace. They returned to discuss their dilemma and looked at the meagre results – including a photo of one woman's husband asleep in a chair. Normality! There has also been the opportunity to talk with a number of students studying for higher degrees in conflict related topics. Many have been from other parts of Europe, the USA and further afield and they are keen to test out their impressions on a willing listener. Fascinating to hear their thoughts on periods I have lived through, for example, a Greek student's impression of the Hunger Strikes. She had the benefit of hindsight, comment and access to contemporary papers – but what she wanted to know was what it felt like at that time.

I continue to make more connections with others, both individuals and groups, with similar concerns, especially in the area of anti racism and the whole issue of the future of Northern Ireland. I spoke about some of these issues while at Ireland Yearly Meeting and hope that I shall meet some of you at Britain Yearly Meeting in York where I shall be running a Special Interest Group.

The area around Quaker House continues to reflect the problems related to high-density accommodation for students. In the long terrace of which Quaker House is a part, only four of the 12 houses are not totally occupied by students; better than someone I met, his nearest 'permanent' neighbour was 14 houses away. There have been some improvements but for many elderly residents the noise, drunkenness and damage are very frightening. One positive development has been the agreement to build a Chinese Community Centre on some derelict land on the bank of the Lagan. They had originally planned to build it nearer to the centre of Belfast, but racist attacks and strenuous opposition led to the decision to build it in this community. The remaining long-term residents (who feel that it will provide some balance to the area) have welcomed the move. We were invited to meet with representatives from the Chinese Community, hear about their hopes and fears and to share some food. One outcome is that we are entering a fund raising event for the Centre and I have signed up to be part of the crew for a dragon boat race on the Lagan! I haven't rowed since I was at University, but am hoping that the fun and excitement will keep me going!

Several people have asked about my granddaughter Grace, born soon after my arrival at Quaker House. She is gorgeous, but I might be just a little biased! My other daughter thought that her clothes were a little too pink, so decided to turn her into a 'rock chick'. Sarah dyed some of her clothes black and decorated them with swirls of red, purple and silver. She's certainly going to make an impression at the baby clinic!

My greetings to you and my best wishes for all your activities.

Anne

PS

There was an error in my last letter. A sentence from the second page was transferred to the first page, making some of the text rather difficult to read. I hope that you were able to unravel this unintentional puzzle!