

Quakers and Brexit

Antonia Swinson reflects on the European referendum result

Head the one about the bishop, the Turner Prize winner and the Quaker?

The Church of England has 'jumped on a middle class bandwagon of horror at the Brexit vote.' So thunders Philip North, the bishop of Burnley, writing recently in the *Church Times*. There had been 'an almighty cry of anger from a dispossessed and marginalised working class.'

Controversial artist Grayson Perry, addressing a smart London arts gathering, recently said: 'You failed in your opposition of the popular right-wing vote... this is a dose of smelling salts to us all.' He said it was time for artists to 'genuinely engage with the majority of the population.'

Then in came the Quaker. Silence. No, you won't be hearing from him. Quakers are brilliant at quietness, except when they are all agreeing that Brexit is a tragedy.

Please let's wake up. Let's not kid ourselves that the Brexit vote can be reversed or that it will be the usual fudged business as usual. Arguably, we are living in a time as pivotal for our island story as the English civil war. This was a period, let us not forget, when Quakerism was forged around the campfires of Oliver Cromwell's New Model Army and in the homes of officers who couldn't buy either the Royalists' or Calvin's top-down undemocratic 'schtick' a minute longer. Are Quakers in danger of becoming unaligned to both our history and our purpose?

Early Quakers bravely sought new ways to reach God, and their successors carried on changing the world through love – whether tackling slavery, prison reform or running successful ethical businesses. So, whose side are we on today? What does equality really mean, as a testimony, as we debate war tactics around Article 50? Remember it was in the North and the Midlands where Quakerism first emerged, where people overwhelmingly voted Leave.

I first saw the seeds of Brexit back in the early 'zeros' when, as a full-time professional writer and passionate pro-European, I accepted a pro bono commission writing the European electoral manifesto for the Scottish Liberal Democrats. I spent a great

week in Brussels drinking in European Community politics with the Liberal group – the second biggest grouping. I came home truly shocked and horrified at the democratic deficit – the European Parliament's lack of teeth against the unelected Commission: a sort of pre-1832 back to the future. But the main reason I knew the UK would eventually leave was homegrown and self-inflicted. At the time, I was writing a book about ethical business, heavily influenced by Kevin Cahill's *Who Owns Britain*. This revealed why and how the UK population was corralled into seven per cent of the land mass, while less than one per cent of the population controlled or owned seventy per cent.

Looking at the figures by county as a business journalist, I realised I just could not see how a popular UK uprising against EU membership could be avoided, unless land for housing doubled to fifteen per cent, akin to that of Germany and France. The growing post-war population had already been squashed into an artificially restricted land supply due to Green Belt legislation, so how could EU immigration possibly happen on top of this without a political meltdown?

With hindsight, I should have been asking just whom did the status quo suit? Over the next decade, despite the economic downturn, asset prices rose, wages in real terms fell and landowners received billions in EU subsidies. Charges of racism muted any honest, healing debate about how our small island could manage land distribution for the benefit of everyone living here. How much easier for faith groups to emote about 'making poverty history' – preferably safely overseas – rather than campaigning here for social justice – through compulsory land purchase, Green Belt planning reform or locally gathered land value taxation.

But we are where we are and Quakers must seize the day, however we voted on 23 June. Let us look beyond disbelief and denial and not be tempted to thwart democracy on our angry little feudal island. We have, after all, the Quaker inheritance of collaborative leadership and can choose to coin new and relevant healing language for this unfurling picture.

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