

Presentation to Quakers in Yorkshire Regional Meeting by Tatiana Garavito and Rosemary Crawley on the 20 July 2019

The Hostile Environment

The term hostile environment is nowadays regrettably only too familiar Mrs May our Prime Minister has received much of the blame for this and the fact that she has is largely her own fault. She used those words as Home Secretary in her introduction to the 2016 Immigration Act. However, the philosophy behind a hostile environment has been around for much longer than Mrs May has.

In explaining that I want to mention the start of post war West Indian migration starting around and with the Empire Windrush. My key point is that the recruitment of labour from the West Indies was being opposed for a range of racialised reasons even in 1947, and this, despite the labour shortages in the UK and despite the obvious needs of the West Indian populations struggling with devastated economies, and with the after effects of floods and hurricanes. When the Empire Windrush set sail the then Colonial Secretary Arthur Creech Jones was heavily criticized for having allowed it to do so and the Minister of Labour at the time, George Isaacs was quick to stress that the West Indians had not been officially invited.

The hostility of the environment was demonstrated in many ways throughout the early decades of settlement, but was probably most evident in the absence from the start of adequate housing provision. Despite the substantial council house building programs of the 1950s and 60s many local authorities operated local laws which excluded new migrants. I worked as a midwife in the mid 1960s in Birmingham and it was far from unusual even then to deliver babies to mothers where the entire family occupied one room (complete with paraffin heater) in a multi-occupied house.

The so-called race riots in 1958 in Nottingham and in Notting Hill in London triggered the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrant's Act which restricted immigration from the new or Black Commonwealth, leaving it largely unaffected for immigrants from the old or White Commonwealth. I was surprised to hear Jonathan Sumption, this year's Reith lecturer state in one of his lectures that the British Parliament has never passed legislation that disadvantages minorities.

I must also mention Peter Griffiths who fought and won a by-election as a Conservative in Smethwick in 1964, using a slogan that many of the older people here today will remember and that I personally still cannot bear to speak out loud. Four years later Enoch Powell made his infamous *Rivers of Blood* speech, which incidentally, was supported in a Gallup poll shortly afterwards by 74% of the population.

And then in the 1970s, came Margaret Thatcher who continued the use of ever increasingly negative rhetoric towards migrants of color. She chose to introduce the idea of people feeling swamped by immigrants prior to her election as leader of the Conservative party in 1979 and again afterward when she had been elected, even though at the time, the population born outside of the UK stood at only 4%.

If we have been swamped by anything at all, it is by the complex and impenetrable mass of legislation that followed the 1962 Act. Ever increasing restrictions were introduced in subsequent immigration acts that came along with increasing frequency and regularity. There were a further 14 such acts after the 1962 Act.

I cannot leave the topic of the hostile environment without referring you to the link between how we have come to being such an unwelcoming country to others and how we have also come almost to the point of extinction through climate change. As Tatiana Garavito so effectively points out in her blog in the latest Sanctuary Everywhere Newsletter, the two are inextricably linked. Both arise out of colonial domination and exploita-

tion. The disaster that we are all predicting here is already happening in the global South. I quote here from her response to the situation.

Lasting and transformative change happens when we are able to connect the dots between struggles, from climate change to housing; from fighting austerity as a whole to cuts specifically targeting women, BME and disabled people; from fighting the rise of the far right to the movement to shut down detention centres. The success of our movements and therefore the survival of life on our planet relies on our ability to connect these dots and our commitment to justice for everyone more than ever before.

QARN

The Quaker Asylum and Refugee Network was established in 2007. It was set up out of a concern around the hostility that refugees were experiencing and that is now openly called the hostile environment. I want to say a little more about that later.

We knew from our experience of working with others that UK asylum and migration policy and practice is fatally flawed, lacking in both justice and compassion. We wanted to challenge that and also to raise awareness among Friends. We have all have been learning on the way.

The aims of the QARN are

- to support each other as Friends acting under concern;
- to keep Friends in our meetings up to date with developments and to work to convince British Quakers that a principled critique of current asylum policy and practice grounded in experience and action should be part of our corporate Quaker witness in keeping with our testimony to equality.
- to guide Britain Yearly Meeting now that Sufferings have accepted that Asylum is a concern, to help them to work for justice and compassion in our asylum and immigration system.

In 2017 QARN became a Quaker recognized body.

Challenging British Friends

British Friends have not adapted quickly to the changing demography and are only very recently acknowledging the need to examine in-built prejudices and privileges and the effect they have on the range of new relationships that they are challenged to make. It is difficult for people of colour to avoid the onslaught of public opinion about them in the media and from the mouths of politicians and I sometimes feel that not all Friends are entirely clear where they stand in relation to some of the demeaning stereotypical views that continue to perpetuate.

Standing against racist views requires genuine welcome and acceptance, and that rules out 'tolerance' and patronizing behavior. No-one wants to be tolerated, we all want to be openly and fully accepted.

Black Friends and refugees need to believe that they can rely on the support and solidarity of the Society and nothing would be more illustrative of that than to see more people looking like us at meetings. It saddened me to see that that there were only two of us at the second QARN conference in 2017. Although I am pleased to say that this year things will be different.

To quote from Andrew Lane in his updated : *Race and Privilege in Europe Some liberal religious communities are active on social justice issues and outspoken about their belief in equality, whilst at the same time remaining racially homogeneous. Malcolm X described the most segregated hour in American life as high noon on Sunday, and a similar situation is found here.*

Sanctuary Everywhere

In the network we realized that as members of a volunteer network we could not give the level of time and energy needed to address this growing concern. It was at this

point that QPSW created a paid post and appointed a worker. Tim Gee visited meetings throughout the country and heard about the experiences of Friends and what they thought should be done about forced migration. The result of that was the Sanctuary Everywhere program launched at our 2017 conference and taken forward so effectively by Tatiana.

There are now nearly 100 Sanctuary meetings engaged in a wide range of practical activities as well as advocating for the rights of those seeking safety here. This corporate witness is a powerful challenge to current official policies and practices. In the face of the hostile environment we offer welcome, hospitality and solidarity. We show that there is another way.

This has not just happened. Many Friends have been involved over many years and the QARN continues alongside Sanctuary Everywhere with our programme of information exchange, campaigning and advocacy. However, the essential co-ordination, and support and skills training for meetings have been made possible through the resources available centrally through Sanctuary Everywhere.