

General Meeting of Friends in Devon and Cornwall
Held at Friends' Meeting House, Mutley Plain, Plymouth
Saturday 9th February 2008

1. Civil Liberties discussion - Who decides which ideas are too dangerous to be heard?
2. Book of Members
3. Website
4. The Future of Devon and Cornwall General Meeting

Who decides which ideas are too dangerous to be heard?

Remember your responsibilities as a citizen for the conduct of local, national and international affairs. Do not shrink from the time and effort your involvement may demand. *Advices & Queries 34*

Excerpts from the video 'Taking Liberties', (by Mark Thomas - for more details: <http://www.noliberties.com>) set the scene for our main discussion and served as an introduction to Emily Apple, our main speaker. Emily has been a lifelong campaigner on peace issues and against the arms trade. She spoke of her desire to protest peacefully against the continuing war in Iraq and economic dependence on the manufacture of weapons and ammunition. Increasingly over recent years she has found herself prevented from making this kind of peaceful protest by the waves of new legislation passed over the last ten years and also by the sometimes illegal activities of the police and arms companies such as EDO in Brighton.

Emily told her own story of attendance at demonstrations in Brighton and at the Climate Camp at Heathrow. This includes eleven arrests and no convictions. She is currently on bail for failing to provide samples in connection with a charge which had already been dropped. Listening to her, I began to feel we are entering Alice in Wonderland. Sadly though, the issue is less amusing for Emily. She has suffered a complete breakdown, attributed by her to the constant struggle resisting false charges and coping with increasingly harsh bail conditions. At one stage, the twin requirements firstly to live in Cornwall, sleeping every night in her home in Falmouth, and secondly to report to police between twelve and two every day amounted to a form of house arrest, for such desperate crimes as obstructing the police or the highway.

In response to all this and to support others who do not want to be driven away from protest, Emily with others launched Fit Watch. Forward Intelligence Teams (FITs) were established initially to control football hooligans. They are now used to monitor protest groups and individuals. Emily showed a 'spotter card' (apparently dropped by a police member of a FIT) with photographs and details of known activists involved in non-violent action. People on these cards are targeted for immediate arrest if seen at any kind of demonstration, whether or not they have committed any offence. Fit Watch provides support and solidarity to protesters and serves as an information

exchange. Emily emphasised that several friends feeling themselves under pressure found the most encouraging thing was to know that others are campaigning.

It all seemed a very bleak picture. Some elements of the police are using laws intended to combat terrorism to intimidate lawful campaigners. The legislation to create a police state is in place though thankfully not used as such and there is a woeful lack of public debate on the issue. However, the courts are standing up to some of the pressure. We still have an independent judiciary. While some individuals undoubtedly suffer hardship and injustice, we still live in a society based on a fair rule of law. There is an articulate campaign against the imposition of Identity Cards, based in part on the evidence that they do not prevent terrorist attack. The Joseph Rowntree Trust has funded research and contributes to NO2ID (www.no2id.net). We heard of the example of Estonia, where every citizen has the right not only to see all information held on her/him, but also to check who has been looking at it. Some websites which may prove of interest: www.openrights.org, www.statewatch.org, www.ecln.org, (ecln = European Civil Liberties Network).

The point was made that freedom and justice do not happen automatically but are the result of campaigning and hard work by generations before us. We have a responsibility to be vigilant and unafraid of saying uncomfortable things. Emily Apple is a brave young woman, determined to champion the right to free speech, free assembly and non-violent protest, at the same time as bringing up her son and pursuing her higher education at Cornwall University College.

Some uncomfortable questions were posed in discussion groups after lunch.

- Will we object to the imposition of identity cards?
- Are we actively working to protect our civil liberties?
- If we are photographed and fingerprinted at a peace or climate change demonstration, we could find ourselves on a FIT spotter card - how do we feel about that?
- Is it possible or desirable that Friends should be seen to be taking a stance on issues such as the loss of freedom of speech or the right to peaceful protest?
- What one thing should meetings be doing relating to civil liberties in their own area?

Book of members 2008

The new book of members is published. Friends are asked to notify Bob Lovett of any corrections by the end of February, so that he can produce a list of amendments.

Website

This is going well and use is increasing. New pages under construction will include a Young Friends page and a News page. This report is the first to be published in this way.

The Future of Devon and Cornwall General Meeting

General Meeting as presently constituted has no definite role in the structure of the Society of Friends, since Area Meetings communicate directly with Meeting for Sufferings and Yearly Meeting. However, it has a strong role in promoting learning and fellowship. It also carries out some practical tasks, such as administration of the two charitable trusts (Gledhill for educational purposes and Starr and Macey for the relief of poverty) compiling the book of members and the GM website. A minute has been forwarded to clerks of Area Meetings to ask them to discuss the future of General Meeting and their own role in covering responsibilities if the GM were laid down.

Dorothy Nelson

11th February 2008