

General election 2017: A briefing for Quakers



Introduction

A general election has been called for 8 June 2017. General elections are an opportunity to look again at things that matter to us. This is a chance for Quakers to express our views and ask questions of the people who wish to represent us. This briefing has been put together to help individuals and meetings raise issues during and after the campaign.

Quakers are encouraged to make use of this opportunity as active citizens. Even if we think our individual vote will not make much difference, raising our concerns in this public forum is always worthwhile.

Our long-standing Quaker concerns for peace, social justice and the environment are underpinned by a moral obligation. We strive for them as integral parts of our shared society.

Quakers believe in the appropriate sharing of resources: personal, societal, natural or financial. Many people are excluded from society's collective goods and services. Inequitable distribution of resources does as much damage spiritually to those who have access to them as to those who do not. We try to look carefully at the way in which we use all our resources so that we do not squander them on unsuitable ends. We also seek to ensure that others are not unfairly deprived by their use.

Our support for Quakers engaging with the election focuses on:

- climate change
- nuclear weapons
- forced migration
- economic inequality.

These concerns are all being worked on within and by Britain Yearly Meeting. They are rooted in the long years of Quaker witness and are a product of our core testimonies. But we recognise that other issues may be more relevant to your meeting or community, so many other topics are explored at www.quakervote.org.uk and www.quaker.org.uk/our-work.

The following pages offer a mixture of 'big picture' issues for debate and specific actions you can ask parliamentary candidates to support. Inside this briefing are key policy requests on each of the above topics, plus questions to ask at hustings. Finally we offer some ideas for action during and after the election.

Climate change

For Quakers in Britain, climate change represents a grave injustice. The drive to extract, consume and profit from fossil fuels is exposing communities around the world to the dangers of a warming planet. Based on our testimony to equality, and our care for the earth, we seek a future in which all people thrive within a safe and stable climate.

Under the UN-led *Paris agreement*, the UK agreed “to pursue efforts to limit the [global] temperature increase to 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels”. Cutting emissions is not just a legal obligation, but a moral one.

Quakers in Britain recently called for a ban on all intensive forms of fossil fuel extraction, including fracking. This year, we could see fracking in the UK for the first time in six years. Following widespread concerns about the impacts of the process, the Scottish and Welsh governments have used devolved powers to place a moratorium on fracking – the Scottish government is currently consulting the public on the subject. The Northern Ireland Executive has also indicated opposition to it. But the UK government is backing the expansion of the industry in England by offering tax breaks and intervening in local planning decisions to allow for new fracking wells. Quakers in Britain call on all governments in the UK to urgently commit to a full ban on fracking.

Specific policy requests

The UK requires an urgent and comprehensive plan to meet its commitment under the Paris deal to pursue efforts to limit global temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. We ask the new government to commit to, and publish, a strategy for this transition within 100 days. The government must act now to ban fracking, along with other forms of intensive oil and gas extraction. It must invest instead in renewable, efficient energy that is affordable to all.

Questions to ask at hustings

- What will your party do to ensure that the UK meets its agreement to pursue efforts to limit the global temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, and to deliver renewable and efficient energy that is affordable to all?
- The UK must help build public support for action on climate change at a personal, local and global level. How will your party help achieve this?
- Carbon-intensive oil and gas extraction methods such as fracking will undermine the UK’s commitments to cut greenhouse gases. Will you support a full ban on these extraction methods across the UK?

Nuclear weapons

Quakers in Britain have consistently opposed nuclear weapons as incompatible with our faith and the dictates of humanity. We believe that the risk of nuclear war, by accident or by design, has never been greater. Concrete steps are needed to reduce this risk. Multilateral negotiations on a new treaty to ban all nuclear weapons are now underway at the United Nations. Currently the UK is boycotting these negotiations.

Quakers in Britain believe the UK should stand by its commitment to achieve a nuclear-free world through multilateral negotiations, and should be at the next round of talks in New York.

Specific policy requests

The UK government should be attending the UN negotiations in New York to achieve a nuclear weapons ban treaty. It should be playing a constructive role in these negotiations to ensure their success. The UK government should be taking a lead in pressing for nuclear disarmament worldwide.

Questions to ask at hustings

- A recent poll revealed that 75 per cent of UK adults think that the UK government should attend the ongoing UN nuclear disarmament negotiations. The current government has boycotted them. What will your party do to ensure that the UK is represented at the next round of talks?
- If the majority of countries in the world sign a nuclear ban treaty, how would that change your party's position on renewing the Trident nuclear weapons programme?
- What work has your party committed to undertake in order to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons?

Forced migration

Rooted in the conviction that there is something of God within every person, Quakers have long worked to offer sanctuary to people forced to flee their homes. But Britain is becoming increasingly hostile for newcomers, in part due to intentional government policy. As a result, people seeking sanctuary in Britain often experience destitution, detention and deportation.

Most asylum seekers are not allowed to work and are forced to rely on state support – this can be as little as £5 a day. Provision of English lessons for people from most countries falls far short of what is needed.

Every year in the UK, 30,000 people are put into prison-like conditions, without a time-limit. This can happen without them having being charged with, or convicted of, any crime. Taxes are used to fund private companies that run these immigration detention centres.

Specific policy requests

Every person in the UK should have the right to work and the right to adequate government support if it is needed.

The UK government must end immoral immigration detention. Time limits must be imposed on existing detentions.

Questions to ask at hustings

- Will your party call on the government to close immigration detention centres? If not, will you promise to work for a time limit on how long someone can be detained?
- Anti-immigration political rhetoric has contributed to divisions and violence within British society. Do you pledge that you will not act or speak in ways likely to generate prejudice or hostility between different groups?

Economic inequality

Equality is a foundation of Quaker faith. We are deeply concerned by the widening gap between rich and poor, which is brought about by injustice in our economic system. We call for an economy that values and protects everyone.

Since 2015, social security cuts and changes to the welfare system have increased this wealth gap by placing unacceptable burdens on those who are most vulnerable – disabled people, the elderly, children and asylum seekers.

In Scotland, while some areas of economic policy have been devolved, the UK government still holds powers over minimum wage, universal credit, means-tested benefits and tax credits.

Cost of living increases brought on by rising inflation and the growth of precarious work have increased in-work poverty. This has left many families struggling to get by. Meanwhile tax-dodging among dominant high street companies remains a key barrier to a more just economy, since it prevents more than £16 billion in tax revenue reaching those who most need it.

A government strategy to reduce economic inequality should include a fair social security system, upheld by a fair tax system and decent pay.

Specific policy requests

The government should halt cuts to social security, which is a vital foundation of a just and compassionate society. It should adopt a minimum wage that adequately reflects the real cost of living at £8.45 per hour (£9.75 in London), and ensure that employment law protects those forced into precarious employment.

The government should focus on multinational companies rather than small-scale offences in order to better tackle the culture of tax avoidance.

Questions to ask at hustings

- What will your party do to ensure a well-functioning social security system, and resist further cuts to social security and associated support structures, which serve as a vital safety net for the most vulnerable in our society?
- What will your party do to ensure that UK workers have secure work that pays enough to meet the cost of living?
- How will your party meet the challenges brought about by the ‘gig-economy’, which puts workers in precarious employment?
- What will you do to ensure that large multinational companies pay their fair share of tax?

What can you do?

The general election is a chance to raise awareness of the issues we care about. What can individuals and meetings do during or after polling day on 8 June?

During the election campaign

You or your local meeting could consider:

- encouraging everyone to use their vote (the deadline to register is 22 May)
- holding a hustings – either as a meeting or with other local groups
- writing to the local candidates on key issues
- writing to the local paper on key issues
- organising a vigil to uphold and support candidates and the democratic process.

For more ideas visit www.quakervote.org.uk or email quakervote@quaker.org.uk.

After the election

When the election is over the work of the new government starts and politics goes on. Meetings could write to their MP to welcome them or to congratulate them on re-election. You could also invite them to experience a meeting for worship, or to join you for a discussion on issues of concern to your local community.

Are there people in your area who feel that their elected representatives don't share their priorities? The meeting could provide a space for them to express their hopes and fears. You could do this through monthly worship sharing or through one-off roundtable discussions on political themes.

Resources

QuakerVote website: www.quakervote.org.uk. This has more resources and detailed questions to put to parliamentary candidates on key topics.

Quakers in Britain website: www.quaker.org.uk. This has the latest news and detailed descriptions of the work of Britain Yearly Meeting.

Toolkit for action, available to download at the QuakerVote website. This contains briefings on how to organise campaigns, plan media work and write to your MP.

Guide to elections and hustings, also available at the QuakerVote website.

Keep in touch with us on the following social media accounts:

@BritishQuakers @QuakerVote @PoliticalQuaker @MediaQuaker @ScotPolQuaker.

For questions about elections and hustings, contact:

Jessica Metheringham, Parliamentary Engagement Officer
jessicam@quaker.org.uk; 020 7663 1107

Mairi Campbell-Jack, Scottish Parliamentary Engagement Officer
mairic@quaker.org.uk; 020 7663 1026

For questions about the key topics in this briefing, contact:

Sunniva Taylor, Sustainability Programme Manager
sunnivat@quaker.org.uk; 020 7663 1047

Gurpreet Bola, Economic Issues Programme Manager
gurpreetb@quaker.org.uk; 020 7663 1055

Timothy Gee, Forced Migration Programme Developer
timothyg@quaker.org.uk; 020 7663 1096

Tim Wallis, Peace & Disarmament Programme Manager
timw@quaker.org.uk; 020 7663 1067

For questions about engaging the media, contact:

Anne van Staveren, Media Relations Officer
annev@quaker.org.uk; 020 7663 1048 or 07958 009703

Promoted by Paul Parker on behalf of Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), 173 Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ.

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